

# Lower bounds on the Münchhausen problem

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## Abstract

“Baron Münchhausen’s omni-sequence”,  $B(n)$ , first defined by Khovanova and Lewis (2011), is a sequence that gives for each  $n$  the minimum number of weighings on balance scales that can verify the correct labeling of  $n$  identically-looking coins with distinct integer weights between 1 gram and  $n$  grams.

A trivial lower bound on  $B(n)$  is  $\log_3 n$ , and it has been shown that  $B(n)$  is  $\log_3 n + O(\log \log n)$ . In this paper we give a first nontrivial lower bound to the Münchhausen problem, showing that there are infinitely many  $n$  values for which  $B(n) > \lceil \log_3 n \rceil$ .

Furthermore, we show that if  $N(k)$  is the number of  $n$  values for which  $k = \lceil \log_3 n \rceil$  and  $B(n) > k$ , then  $N(k)$  is an unbounded function of  $k$ .

## 1 Introduction

Coin-weighing puzzles have been abundantly discussed in the mathematical literature over the past 60 years (see, e.g. [11, 6, 10, 5]). In coin-weighing problems one must typically identify a counterfeit coin from a set of identically-looking coins by use of balance scales, utilizing the knowledge that the counterfeit coin has distinctive weight. This can be generalized to the problem of identifying a coin, or a subset of the coins, based on distinctive weight characteristics, or, alternatively, to the problem of establishing the weight of a given coin.

This paper relates to a different kind of coin-weighing puzzle, which we call the Münchhausen coin-weighing problem (following, e.g., [2]). Consider the following question: given  $n$  coins with distinct integer weights between 1 gram and  $n$  grams, each labeled by a distinct integer label between 1 and  $n$ , what is the minimum number of weighings of these  $n$  coins on balance scales that can prove unequivocally that all coins are labeled by their correct weight?

This question differs from classic coin-weighing problems in that we do not need to *discover* the weights, but only to determine whether or not a given labeling of weights is the correct one. To establish the weights one would require  $\Omega(n \log n)$  weighings (as can be proved by reasoning similar to that which establishes lower bounds for comparative sorting [9, 4]), whereas merely verifying an existing labeling can be performed trivially in  $O(n)$  weighings.

This question, inspired by a riddle that appeared in the Moscow Mathematical Olympiad [1], gives rise to an integer sequence,  $B(n)$ , that was studied in [8] and was dubbed there “Baron Münchhausen’s omni-sequence”. It appears as sequence A186313 in the On-line Encyclopedia of Integer Sequences [7].

Though much progress has been made to tighten the known upper bounds on  $B(n)$  [8, 3, 2], the trivial lower bound of  $\log_3 n$  has proved surprisingly resilient. This lower bound stems from the straightforward observation that if the number of weighings is less than  $\log_3 n$ , there must be at least two coins that participate in all weighings in identical roles (that is, for each weighing, they are either both on the left-hand side of the scales, both on the right-hand side or both held out from the weighing). This being the case, the weights of the two coins can be exchanged with no change to the outcome of any of the weighings, and therefore the weighings cannot provide an unequivocal verification of the weights.

In this paper we present a first nontrivial lower bound for this problem. Namely, we prove the following theorem.

**Theorem 1.** *For any  $n$ ,*

$$3^{B(n)} \geq n + \Omega(\log \log n). \quad (1)$$

*Equivalently, there exists an  $l = l(k) \in \Omega(\log k)$ , such that for any  $k$ ,*

$$n \in [3^k - l, 3^k] \Rightarrow B(n) > k. \quad (2)$$

*In particular, it is true that*

$$N(k) \in \Omega(\log k), \quad (3)$$

*where  $N(k)$  is the number of  $n$  values for which  $k = \lceil \log_3 n \rceil$  and  $B(n) > k$ .*

## 2 Proof of the main theorem

We begin by introducing some terminology. First, following [2], we describe sequences of weighings by means of matrices. A  $k \times n$  matrix  $M$  whose elements  $M_{ij}$  belong to the set  $\{-1, 0, 1\}$  describes a sequence of  $k$  weighings of  $n$  coins in the following manner. The three possible values for  $M_{ij}$ , namely 1,  $-1$  and 0, indicate that on the  $i$ 'th weighing coin  $j$  is to be placed on the right hand side of the scales, to be placed on the left hand side of the scales and to be held out, respectively.

In the case of the Münchhausen problem, it is known what weights the coins to be weighed are: the first coin weighs 1 gram, the second weighs 2 grams, and

so on. We describe these weights by the vector  $\vec{n} = [1, \dots, n]^T$ . The result of the weighing sequence is therefore given by the element-wise signs of the vector  $M\vec{n}$ . We describe the operation including both multiplication by  $\vec{n}$  and sign-taking by the single operator  $w(M)$ .

A matrix is *Münchhausen* if the sequence of weighings it describes generates a sequence of weigh results (signs) when weighing  $\vec{n}$  that is unique among all possible permutations of  $\vec{n}$ . Equivalently, a matrix is Münchhausen if  $w(M) = w(M\pi) \Rightarrow \pi = I$  for an  $n \times n$  permutation matrix  $\pi$ .

Baron Münchhausen’s omni-sequence,  $B(n)$ , is the sequence that gives for each  $n$  the minimum  $k$  for which there exists a  $k \times n$  Münchhausen matrix. Theorem 1 gives a first nontrivial lower bound on  $B(n)$ .

We now turn to define two sets,  $C$  and  $R$ , that will be used in the theorem’s proof.

Let  $\mathcal{M}$  be the set of all  $k \times n$  Münchhausen matrices, where  $k = B(n)$ .

Consider, first, the trivial lower bound for Baron Münchhausen’s omni-sequence. In matrix terminology, we claim that if  $M \in \mathcal{M}$ , then  $n \leq 3^k$ . The reason for this is that if  $n > 3^k$ , at least two of  $M$ ’s columns are identical. A permutation  $\pi$  permuting the columns of  $M$  by switching identical columns will have no effect on it: we have  $M = M\pi$ , and therefore necessarily also  $w(M) = w(M\pi)$ . The relevant observation regarding this proof is that it demonstrates that the columns of  $M$  must be distinct.

Let  $\text{cols}(M)$  be the set of columns of matrix  $M$  (ignoring their order), and define

$$C = C(n) \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \{\text{cols}(M) : M \in \mathcal{M}\}.$$

Because all elements of  $\text{cols}(M)$  for any  $M \in \mathcal{M}$  belong to the set  $\{-1, 0, 1\}^k$  of size  $3^k$ , we know that  $|C| \leq \binom{3^k}{n}$ .

Another useful observation is that no  $M \in \mathcal{M}$  can have two identical rows. Had there been two identical rows in  $M$  these would have indicated two identical weighings. One of these weighings could therefore have been removed, because it does not add any further information regarding the coins being weighed. This contradicts the assumption that  $k = B(n)$ , because it explicitly generates a Münchhausen matrix with fewer rows.

Consider, now, row permutations on  $M$ . For an  $M$  with a large  $k$ , there are many row permutations of  $M$  that do not change  $w(M)$ . For example, consider that each row of  $M$  generates a sign that has only 3 possibilities. As such, there will be at least  $\lceil k/3 \rceil$  rows that share the same generated sign. Any  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2$  of the  $\lceil k/3 \rceil!$  possible row permutations on  $M$  that keep all rows other than these  $\lceil k/3 \rceil$  as fixed points share the same  $w(\sigma_1 M) = w(\sigma_2 M) = w(M)$ . We define  $R = R(M)$  to be the set of all row permutations  $\sigma$  that satisfy  $w(\sigma M) = w(M)$ , and we note that  $|R| \geq \lceil k/3 \rceil!$ .

We establish Theorem 1 by means of the following lemma.

**Lemma 1.1.** *For any  $M \in \mathcal{M}$ ,*

$$|C| \geq |R|. \tag{4}$$

*Proof.* Define the relation  $f : R \rightarrow C$  as follows: for  $\sigma \in R$ , let  $f(\sigma)$  be the set of columns of  $\sigma M$ . Because changing the order of the weighings clearly has no effect on whether or not a set of weighings establishes unequivocally the weights of  $n$  coins,  $\sigma M$  is Münchhausen if and only if  $M$  is Münchhausen, so by definition the set of columns of  $\sigma M$  is necessarily a member of  $C$ . In order to establish Equation (4), we make the stronger claim that  $f$  is one-to-one.

To prove this, let us assume to the contrary that  $f$  is not one-to-one. This indicates the existence of two row permutations  $\sigma_1, \sigma_2 \in R$  for which  $f(\sigma_1) = f(\sigma_2)$ . Because  $M$  cannot have identical rows, we know that  $\sigma_1 M \neq \sigma_2 M$ . The two are therefore related by a column permutation,  $\pi$ , which is not the identity, as follows:

$$\sigma_1 M \pi = \sigma_2 M.$$

Let  $\sigma \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \sigma_2^{-1} \sigma_1$ , then

$$\sigma M \pi = M.$$

Recall that by definition of  $R$ , we have  $w(M) = w(\sigma M)$ , so

$$w(\sigma M \pi) = w(M) = w(\sigma M),$$

so by definition  $\sigma M$  cannot be a Münchhausen matrix. However, as argued earlier,  $\sigma M$  is Münchhausen if and only if  $M$  is Münchhausen, so the above implies that  $M$ , too, is not Münchhausen, contradicting the assumption.  $\square$

Armed with Lemma 1.1, Theorem 1, our main claim, becomes a straightforward corollary.

*Proof of Theorem 1.* Let us take  $l$  to be  $3^k - n$ . The inequality  $|C| \leq \binom{3^k}{n}$  implies in this case that  $|C| < 3^{kl}$ . On the other hand,  $\log_3 |R|$  is  $\Omega(k \log k)$ , so Lemma 1.1 implies that  $l$  is  $\Omega(\log k)$ , proving Equation (2).

This, in turn, implies Equation (1), because  $k$  is  $\Omega(\log n)$ . Equation (3) is a special case of Equation (2), because, by definition,  $N(k) > l$ .  $\square$

### 3 Conclusions

With the new Theorem 1, the best known bounds now place  $n$  between  $3^k - \Omega(\log k)$  and  $3^k / O(\text{polylog } k)$ , for  $n$  to satisfy  $B(n) = k$ . This still leaves a significant window for further refinement. At the current time, it is not even known whether  $B(n)$  is a monotone sequence.

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(Received 16 Apr 2013; revised 10 Jan 2014)