

Short Note

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Short Note

An Algorithm for Calculating Terms of the Stirling's Formula Remainder

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Abstract

In this note, we deal with Stirling's approximation to $N!$. We employ elementary mathematical techniques to provide an algorithm to calculate many terms of Stirling's formula remainder. Our algorithm, based on a recursive scheme using polynomials, is an alternative to some methodologies already proposed in the literature.

Keywords: stirling formula; remainder; approximation

MSC: 41A80; 68W30

1. Introduction

In this note, we study Stirling's approximation to $N!$, a fundamental result in asymptotic analysis and number theory. Originally derived in the 18th century, the approximation provides an accurate estimate of the factorial function for large values of N . Over the centuries, various forms and refinements of this approximation have been developed. A particularly elegant and instructive derivation, based solely on elementary transformations of integrals and term-by-term integration of a series, was introduced by Marsaglia [1].

Our first objective is to briefly derive Stirling's formula. We begin with the representation of $\ln N!$ as a sum of logarithms:

$$\begin{aligned} \ln N! &= \ln 1 + \ln 2 + \dots + \ln N = \\ &= \int_1^N \ln x \, dx + \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} \frac{\ln(k+1) - \ln k}{2} - \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where each term D_k measures the discrepancy between the trapezoidal rule and the exact integral of $\ln x$ over the interval $[k, k+1]$. That is,

$$\begin{aligned} D_k &= \int_k^{k+1} \ln x \, dx - \frac{\ln k + \ln(k+1)}{2} = \\ &= (x \ln x - x) \Big|_k^{k+1} - \frac{\ln k + \ln(k+1)}{2} = \\ &= (k+1) \ln(k+1) - k \ln k - 1 - \frac{\ln k + \ln(k+1)}{2} = \\ &= \left(k + \frac{1}{2}\right) \ln \left(1 + \frac{1}{k}\right) - 1. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

The integral in (1) can be evaluated explicitly,

$$\int_1^N \ln x \, dx = N \ln N - N + 1, \quad \text{and} \quad \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} \frac{\ln(k+1) - \ln k}{2} = \frac{\ln N}{2}$$

is a telescoping sum, as the terms cancel pairwise. In this way,

$$\begin{aligned}\ln N! &= N \ln N - N + 1 + \frac{\ln N}{2} - \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k = \\ &= \ln(N^N) - N + 1 + \ln(N^{1/2}) - \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k,\end{aligned}$$

which leads to

$$N! = N^{N+1/2} e^{1-N} \exp\left(-\sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k\right), \quad (3)$$

where D_k is given in (2).

It is well known, from the Mercator series, that

$$\ln(1+x) = x - \frac{x^2}{2} + \frac{x^3}{3} - \frac{x^4}{4} + \dots = \sum_{i=1}^{+\infty} (-1)^{i+1} \frac{x^i}{i}, \quad -1 < x \leq 1.$$

Substituting $x = 1/k$, where $k = 1, 2, 3, \dots$, yields

$$\ln\left(1 + \frac{1}{k}\right) = \frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{2k^2} + \frac{1}{3k^3} - \frac{1}{4k^4} + \dots = \sum_{i=1}^{+\infty} (-1)^{i+1} \frac{1}{ik^i}.$$

Thus, D_k in (2) can be rewritten as

$$\begin{aligned}D_k &= \left(k + \frac{1}{2}\right) \ln\left(1 + \frac{1}{k}\right) - 1 = \\ &= \left(1 - \frac{1}{2k} + \frac{1}{3k^2} - \frac{1}{4k^3} + \dots\right) + \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{2k^2} + \frac{1}{3k^3} - \dots\right) - 1 = \\ &= \left(\frac{1}{3} - \frac{1}{2 \cdot 2}\right) \frac{1}{k^2} - \left(\frac{1}{4} - \frac{1}{2 \cdot 3}\right) \frac{1}{k^3} + \left(\frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{2 \cdot 4}\right) \frac{1}{k^4} - \dots = \\ &= \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \left(\frac{1}{i+1} - \frac{1}{2i}\right) \frac{1}{k^i} = \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{a_i}{k^i},\end{aligned}$$

where $a_i = 1/(i+1) - 1/(2i)$, for $i = 2, 3, 4, \dots$, is a positive decreasing sequence of real numbers that converges to zero.

Thus,

$$\sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k = \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{a_i}{k^i} = \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i a_i \left(\sum_{k=1}^{N-1} \frac{1}{k^i}\right).$$

From the Riemann Zeta function (see [2] for details),

$$\zeta(x) = \sum_{j=1}^{+\infty} \frac{1}{j^x},$$

which is convergent for $x \in \mathbf{R}$ with $x > 1$, it follows that

$$\sum_{k=1}^{N-1} \frac{1}{k^i} = \zeta(i) - \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{1}{k^i},$$

and, therefore,

$$\sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k = \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i a_i \zeta(i) - \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i a_i \left(\sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{1}{k^i} \right).$$

From [2,3],

$$\sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{\zeta(i)}{2i} = \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{\zeta(2)}{2} - \frac{\zeta(3)}{3} + \frac{\zeta(4)}{4} - \frac{\zeta(5)}{5} + \dots \right) = \frac{\gamma}{2},$$

where γ is the Euler-Mascheroni constant.

Additionally, from [3,4], based on the Riemann Zeta function and Rational Zeta series, it follows that

$$\sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{\zeta(i) - 1}{i + 1} = \frac{1}{2} (\gamma + 3 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi}) - \ln 2.$$

Moreover, using the Mercator series evaluated at $x = 1$,

$$\sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{1}{i + 1} = \ln 2 - \frac{1}{2},$$

we arrive at the Suryanarayana formula (see [3] for example),

$$\sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{\zeta(i)}{i + 1} = \frac{1}{2} (\gamma + 3 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi}) - \ln 2 + \left(\ln 2 - \frac{1}{2} \right) = \frac{\gamma}{2} + 1 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi},$$

and, consequently,

$$\sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i a_i \zeta(i) = \frac{\gamma}{2} + 1 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi} - \frac{\gamma}{2} = 1 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi}.$$

In this way,

$$\sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k = 1 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi} - \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{a_i}{k^i}.$$

Therefore,

$$\exp \left(- \sum_{k=1}^{N-1} D_k \right) = e^{-1} \sqrt{2\pi} e^{r_N},$$

where r_N is given by

$$r_N = \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{a_i}{k^i}, \quad (4)$$

and, as before, $a_i = 1/(i + 1) - 1/(2i)$, for $i = 2, 3, 4, \dots$, is a positive decreasing sequence of real numbers that converges to zero.

Finally, Eq. (3), known in the literature as Stirling's formula, can be expressed as

$$N! = \sqrt{2\pi} N^{N+1/2} e^{-N} e^{r_N}, \quad (5)$$

where the remainder r_N is given in (4).

Eq (5) was first presented in [5], where it was also established that $11/2 < r_N + \ln \sqrt{2\pi} < 1$. Since then, the term r_N has been the subject of detailed study (see [6–9] for historical notes), particularly through works such as [10], who first provided sharp two-sided bounds for it,

$$\frac{1}{12N+1} < r_N < \frac{1}{12N}.$$

Several years later, [11] improved the estimation of r_N ,

$$\frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N^3} < r_N < \frac{1}{12N}.$$

More recently, [12] obtained the following result,

$$\frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N^3} < r_N < \frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N(N+1)(N+2)},$$

[8] proved that

$$\frac{1}{12N+c_1} \leq r_N < \frac{1}{12N+c_2},$$

with the best possible constants $c_1 = -12 + 1/(1 - \ln \sqrt{2\pi}) \approx 0.336317$ and $c_2 = 0$, and [9] derived the following inequality:

$$\frac{1}{12N} - \frac{7}{360N(7N^2+2)} - \frac{13}{35280N^7} < r_N < \frac{1}{12N} - \frac{7}{360N(7N^2+2)}.$$

It is also important to highlight the works [1,7,13–15] who focused on obtaining explicit formulas for the coefficients of the asymptotic expansion of r_N .

The main goal of this work is to present an algorithm, relying only on elementary mathematical methods techniques, for efficiently calculating many terms of r_N exactly. To the best of our knowledge, we understand that our algorithm represents an alternative to the procedures presented herein.

2. The Algorithm

Observe that r_N in (4) can be rewritten as

$$r_N = \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \sum_{i=2}^{+\infty} (-1)^i \frac{a_i}{k^i} = \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{a_2}{k^2} - \frac{a_3}{k^3} + \frac{a_4}{k^4} - \frac{a_5}{k^5} + \dots \right),$$

a numerical series whose general term forms a convergent alternating series for each N . Define

$$S_j(k) = \sum_{i=2}^j (-1)^i \frac{a_i}{k^i},$$

the sequence of partial sums of this series.

Step 1: Consider the polynomial p_1 defined by the following equation:

$$S_4(k) - \alpha_1 \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) = \frac{p_1(k)}{k^4(k+1)},$$

where α_1 is a real parameter to be determined later. This leads to:

$$\begin{aligned} p_1(k) &= k^4(k+1) \left(S_4(k) - \alpha_1 \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) \right) = \\ &= k^4(k+1) \left(\frac{a_2}{k^2} - \frac{a_3}{k^3} + \frac{a_4}{k^4} - \alpha_1 \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) \right) = \\ &= (a_2 - \alpha_1)k^3 + (a_2 - a_3)k^2 + (a_4 - a_3)k + a_4. \end{aligned}$$

Now, α_1 is chosen in order to reduce the degree of p_1 to the lowest possible value. In this case, $\alpha_1 = a_2 = 1/12$ and, after some calculations, we obtain

$$p_1(k) = (a_4 - a_3)k + a_4 = \frac{-1}{120}k + \frac{3}{40}$$

which is a polynomial of degree 1, that is, $\deg(p_1) = 1$. We denote by $\eta(p_1) = -1/120$ the coefficient associated with the highest degree term of the polynomial p_1 .

In this way, the partial sum S_4 can be expressed as

$$S_4(k) = \frac{a_2}{k^2} - \frac{a_3}{k^3} + \frac{a_4}{k^4} = \frac{1}{12} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) + \frac{p_1(k)}{k^4(k+1)}.$$

As an important remark, r_N in (4) can then be approximated by

$$\begin{aligned} r_N &\approx \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} S_4(k) = \frac{1}{12} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_1(k)}{k^4(k+1)} = \\ &= \frac{1}{12N} + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_1(k)}{k^4(k+1)}. \end{aligned}$$

The sum above can be estimated using the integral test, comparing it to an improper integral.

Step 2: Similarly, we seek a polynomial p_3 that satisfies

$$\frac{p_1(k)}{k^4(k+1)} - \frac{a_5}{k^5} + \frac{a_6}{k^6} - \alpha_3 \left(\frac{1}{k^3} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^3} \right) = \frac{p_3(k)}{k^6(k+1)^3},$$

where α_3 is a real parameter to be determined.

Thus,

$$p_3(k) = k^2(k+1)^2 p_1(k) - a_5 k(k+1)^3 + a_6(k+1)^3 - \alpha_3 k^3 \left((k+1)^3 - k^3 \right).$$

Again, α_3 is chosen with the aim of reducing the degree of p_3 to the lowest possible value. In this case, $\alpha_3 = \eta(p_1)/3 = -1/360$.

Therefore, we can present $S_6(k)$ as

$$S_6(k) = \frac{1}{12} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) - \frac{1}{360} \left(\frac{1}{k^3} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^3} \right) + \frac{p_3(k)}{k^6(k+1)^3},$$

where

$$p_3(k) = \frac{1}{252}k^3 + \frac{3}{56}k^2 + \frac{47}{420}k + \frac{5}{84}.$$

Note that $\deg(p_3) = 3$ and $\eta(p_3) = 1/252$.

Again, as a remark, r_N in (4) is better approximated by

$$r_N \approx \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} S_6(k) = \frac{1}{12} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) - \frac{1}{360} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{1}{k^3} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^3} \right) + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_3(k)}{k^6(k+1)^3} = \frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N^3} + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_3(k)}{k^6(k+1)^3}.$$

Step 3: Similarly, aiming for a better approximation of r_N , we write

$$\frac{p_3(k)}{k^6(k+1)^3} - \frac{a_7}{k^7} + \frac{a_8}{k^8} - \alpha_5 \left(\frac{1}{k^5} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^5} \right) = \frac{p_5(k)}{k^8(k+1)^5},$$

where α_5 is, as before, a real parameter to be determined.

The polynomial p_5 can be rewritten as

$$p_5(k) = k^2(k+1)^2 p_3(k) - a_7 k(k+1)^5 + a_8 (k+1)^5 - \alpha_5 k^3 \left((k+1)^5 - k^5 \right).$$

The parameter α_5 is chosen with the aim of reducing the degree of p_5 to the lowest possible value. Thus, $\alpha_5 = \eta(p_3)/5 = 1/1260$.

Then, $S_8(k)$ is given by

$$S_8(k) = \frac{1}{12} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) - \frac{1}{360} \left(\frac{1}{k^3} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^3} \right) + \frac{1}{1260} \left(\frac{1}{k^5} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^5} \right) + \frac{p_5(k)}{k^8(k+1)^5},$$

where

$$p_5(k) = -\frac{1}{240}k^5 + \frac{29}{720}k^4 + \frac{13}{72}k^3 + \frac{5}{18}k^2 + \frac{191}{1008}k + \frac{7}{144}.$$

Note that $\deg(p_5) = 5$ and $\eta(p_5) = -1/240$.

Therefore, a better approximation for r_N in (4) is obtained:

$$r_N \approx \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} S_8(k) = \frac{1}{12} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) - \frac{1}{360} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{1}{k^3} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^3} \right) + \frac{1}{1260} \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \left(\frac{1}{k^5} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^5} \right) + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_5(k)}{k^8(k+1)^5} = \frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N^3} + \frac{1}{1260N^5} + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_5(k)}{k^8(k+1)^5}.$$

Step 4: Likewise, the polynomial p_7 is defined as

$$p_7(k) = k^2(k+1)^2 p_5(k) - a_9 k(k+1)^7 + a_{10} (k+1)^7 - \alpha_7 k^3 \left((k+1)^7 - k^7 \right).$$

Taking $\alpha_7 = \eta(p_5)/7 = -1/1680$, we obtain

$$p_7(k) = \frac{1}{132}k^7 + \frac{7}{132}k^6 + \frac{3349}{13860}k^5 + \frac{8119}{13860}k^4 + \frac{10891}{13860}k^3 + \frac{105}{176}k^2 + \frac{479}{1980}k + \frac{9}{220},$$

where $\deg(p_7) = 7$ and $\eta(p_7) = 1/132$.

Thus,

$$S_{10}(k) = \frac{1}{12} \left(\frac{1}{k} - \frac{1}{k+1} \right) - \frac{1}{360} \left(\frac{1}{k^3} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^3} \right) + \\ + \frac{1}{1260} \left(\frac{1}{k^5} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^5} \right) - \frac{1}{1680} \left(\frac{1}{k^7} - \frac{1}{(k+1)^7} \right) + \frac{p_7(k)}{k^{10}(k+1)^7},$$

and then

$$r_N \approx \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} S_{10}(k) = \frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N^3} + \frac{1}{1260N^5} - \frac{1}{1680N^7} + \sum_{k=N}^{+\infty} \frac{p_7(k)}{k^{10}(k+1)^7},$$

where $\deg(p_7) = 7$.

In summary, the following algorithm is presented.

Step 5: Algorithm

$$\alpha_1 = 1/12$$

$$p_1(k) = -(1/120)k + 3/40 = \eta(p_1)k + 3/40$$

For $l = 1, 2, 3, \dots$

$$p_{2l+1}(k) = k^2(k+1)^2 p_{2l-1}(k) - a_{2l+3} k(k+1)^{2l+1} + a_{2l+4} (k+1)^{2l+1} \\ - \alpha_{2l+1} k^3 \left((k+1)^{2l+1} - k^{2l+1} \right)$$

$$\alpha_{2l+1} = \eta(p_{2l-1}) / (2l+1)$$

Remark 1. The sequence (α_{2l+1}) , for $l = 0, 1, 2, 3, \dots$, defined above, is crucial because it leads to

$$r_N = \sum_{l=0}^{+\infty} (-1)^l \frac{\alpha_{2l+1}}{N^{2l+1}}.$$

Furthermore, based on computational tests, it was observed that, for $l = 0, 1, 2, \dots$,

$$\deg(p_{2l+1}) = 2l + 1.$$

The exact calculations of $p_{2l+1}(k)$ and α_{2l+1} , for $l = 1, 2, 3, \dots$, were carried out using symbolic computations in the Mathematica software [16], using the script that follows:

```

1 np = 19; (* number of terms to compute *)
2 nn = 2*np + 4;
3 ind = Range[1, nn]; (* index range for initial coefficient calculation *)
4
5 a = 1/(ind + 1) - 1/(2*ind); (* initial sequence used for recursion *)
6
7 p1 = (k^2)*(k + 1)^2; (* base polynomial for recursion *)
8 q = (a[[4]] - a[[3]]) k + a[[4]]; (* initial q polynomial *)
9 alpha = {a[[2]]}; (* initialize list of alpha coefficients *)
10
11 Timing[
12   For[j = 1, j <= np, j++,
13     l = 2*j + 1; (* degree index for current step *)
14     p2 = (k + 1)^l; (* auxiliary polynomial for current term *)
15     p = p1*q + (a[[1 + 3]] - a[[1 + 2]]*k)*p2; (* compute new polynomial *)
16     aux = Reverse[CoefficientList[p, k]]; (* coefficients of p in descending order *)
17     q = p - (aux[[1]]/l)*(k^3)*(p2 - k^l); (*update q for next iteration*)
18     alpha = Append[alpha, aux[[1]]/l]; (* store current alpha coeff. *)
19   ]
20 ]
21
```

```

22 l (* last degree index computed *)
23 Length[CoefficientList[q, k]] - 1 (* degree of final polynomial pl *)
24 Expand[q]; (* display expanded polynomial pl *)
25 alpha; (* display list of alpha coefficients *)

```

To illustrate our algorithm, we calculate $\alpha_1, \alpha_3, \alpha_5, \dots, \alpha_{39}$ using the Mathematica script provided above (CPU time approximately 0.1 seconds, executed in the trial version of Mathematica Online) and then, r_N in (4) can be approximated by

$$\begin{aligned}
 r_N = \sum_{l=0}^{+\infty} (-1)^l \frac{\alpha_{2l+1}}{N^{2l+1}} \approx & \frac{1}{12N} - \frac{1}{360N^3} + \frac{1}{1260N^5} - \frac{1}{1680N^7} + \frac{1}{1188N^9} - \\
 & - \frac{691}{360360N^{11}} + \frac{1}{156N^{13}} - \frac{3617}{122400N^{15}} + \frac{43867}{244188N^{17}} - \frac{174611}{125400N^{19}} + \\
 & + \frac{77683}{5796N^{21}} - \frac{236364091}{1506960N^{23}} + \frac{657931}{300N^{25}} - \frac{3392780147}{93960N^{27}} + \frac{1723168255201}{2492028N^{29}} - \\
 & - \frac{7709321041217}{505920N^{31}} + \frac{151628697551}{396N^{33}} - \frac{26315271553053477373}{2418179400N^{35}} + \\
 & + \frac{154210205991661}{444N^{37}} - \frac{261082718496449122051}{21106800N^{39}}.
 \end{aligned}$$

As a test, the CPU time to calculate the first 300 terms of r_N was approximately 200 seconds. Remark 1 have been verified in this case.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest and there is no financial interest to report.

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