

Contents

Chapter 1. The second moment theory of families of L -functions	1
1.1. General introduction	1
1.2. The family of twists of a fixed modular form	10
1.3. Positive proportion of non-vanishing	12
1.4. Large central values	14
1.5. Bounds on the analytic rank	14
1.6. A conjecture of Mazur-Rubin concerning modular symbols	15
1.7. Twisted moment estimates	16
Outline of the book	18
Acknowledgments	19
Chapter 2. Preliminaries	21
2.1. Notation and conventions	21
2.2. Hecke L -functions	22
2.3. Auxiliary L -functions	26
2.4. Prime Number Theorems	35
2.5. Consequences of the functional equations	38
2.6. A factorization lemma	41
2.7. A shifted convolution problem	45
2.8. Partition of unity	46
Chapter 3. Algebraic exponential sums	47
3.1. Averages over Dirichlet characters	47
3.2. Bounds for Kloosterman sums	48
3.3. Sketch of the arguments	49
3.4. Trace functions and their Mellin transforms	54
3.5. The equidistribution group of a Mellin transform	57
Chapter 4. Computation of the first twisted moment	61
4.1. Introduction	61
4.2. Proof	62
4.3. First moment with trace functions	63
Chapter 5. Computation of the second twisted moment	65
5.1. Introduction	65
5.2. Isolating the main term	66
5.3. The error term	69
5.4. The trivial bound	69
5.5. The shifted convolution bound	69
5.6. Bilinear sums of Kloosterman sums	70

5.7. Optimization	71
Chapter 6. Non-vanishing at the central point	73
6.1. Introduction	73
6.2. The Cauchy-Schwarz inequality	73
6.3. Choosing the mollifier	74
6.4. Computation of the first mollified moment	76
6.5. Computation of the second mollified moment	78
6.6. Improvement of Theorem 1.8	81
6.7. Non-vanishing with Mellin constraints	81
Chapter 7. Extreme values of twisted L -functions	87
7.1. Introduction	87
7.2. Background on the resonator polynomial	88
7.3. Evaluation of the moments	97
7.4. Extreme values with angular constraints	106
7.5. Large values of products	113
Chapter 8. Upper bounds for the analytic rank	119
8.1. Introduction	119
8.2. Application of the explicit formula	119
8.3. Proof of the mean-square estimate	122
Chapter 9. A conjecture of Mazur-Rubin concerning modular symbols	137
9.1. Introduction	137
9.2. Proof of the theorem	139
9.3. Modular symbols and trace functions	140
Notation index	143
Bibliography	145

Abstract

For a fairly general family of L -functions, we survey the known consequences of the existence of asymptotic formulas with power-saving error term for the (twisted) first and second moments of the central values in the family.

We then consider in detail the important special case of the family of twists of a fixed cusp form by primitive Dirichlet characters modulo a prime q , and prove that it satisfies such formulas. We derive arithmetic consequences:

- a positive proportion of central values $L(f \otimes \chi, 1/2)$ are non-zero, and indeed bounded from below;
- there exist many characters χ for which the central L -value is very large;
- the probability of a large analytic rank decays exponentially fast.

We finally show how the second moment estimate establishes a special case of a conjecture of Mazur and Rubin concerning the distribution of modular symbols.

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