MATH 361: NUMBER THEORY — SEVENTH LECTURE

1. The Unit Group of $\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z}$

Consider a nonunit positive integer,

$$n = \prod p^{e_p} > 1.$$

The Sun Ze Theorem gives a ring isomorphism,

$$\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z} \cong \prod \mathbb{Z}/p^{e_p}\mathbb{Z}.$$

The right side is the cartesian product of the rings $\mathbb{Z}/p^{e_p}\mathbb{Z}$, meaning that addition and multiplication are carried out componentwise. It follows that the corresponding unit group is

$$(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong \prod (\mathbb{Z}/p^{e_p}\mathbb{Z})^\times.$$

Thus to study the unit group $(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times$ it suffices to consider $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ where p is prime and $e > 0$. Recall that in general,

$$|(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times| = \varphi(n),$$

so that for prime powers,

$$|(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times| = \varphi(p^e) = p^{e-1}(p-1),$$

and especially for primes,

$$|(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times| = p - 1.$$

Here are some examples of unit groups modulo prime powers, most but not quite all cyclic.

$$\begin{aligned}
(\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1\}, \cdot) = (\{2^0\}, \cdot) \cong (\{0\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/\mathbb{Z}, \\
(\mathbb{Z}/3\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1, 2\}, \cdot) = (\{2^0, 2^1\}, \cdot) \cong (\{0, 1\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}, \\
(\mathbb{Z}/4\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1, 3\}, \cdot) = (\{3^0, 3^1\}, \cdot) \cong (\{0, 1\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}, \\
(\mathbb{Z}/5\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1, 2, 3, 4\}, \cdot) = (\{2^0, 2^1, 2^2, 2^3\}, \cdot) \\
&\cong (\{0, 1, 2, 3\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/4\mathbb{Z}, \\
(\mathbb{Z}/7\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}, \cdot) = (\{3^0, 3^1, 3^2, 3^3, 3^4, 3^5\}, \cdot) \\
&\cong (\{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/6\mathbb{Z}, \\
(\mathbb{Z}/8\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1, 3, 5, 7\}, \cdot) = (\{3^0 5^0, 3^1 5^0, 3^0 5^1, 3^1 5^1\}, \cdot) \\
&\cong (\{0, 1\} \times \{0, 1\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z} \times \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}, \\
(\mathbb{Z}/9\mathbb{Z})^\times &= (\{1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8\}, \cdot) = (\{2^0, 2^1, 2^2, 2^3, 2^4, 2^5\}, \cdot) \\
&\cong (\{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5\}, +) = \mathbb{Z}/6\mathbb{Z}.
\end{aligned}$$

2. Prime Unit Group Structure: Abelian Group Theory Argument

Proposition 2.1. *Let G be any finite subgroup of the unit group of any field. Then G is cyclic. In particular, the multiplicative group modulo any prime p is cyclic,*

$$(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong \mathbb{Z}/(p-1)\mathbb{Z}.$$

That is, there is a generator g mod p such that

$$(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times = \{1, g, g^2, \dots, g^{p-2}\}.$$

Proof. We may assume that G is not trivial. By the structure theorem for finitely generated abelian groups,

$$(G, \cdot) \cong (\mathbb{Z}/d_1\mathbb{Z} \times \mathbb{Z}/d_2\mathbb{Z} \times \cdots \times \mathbb{Z}/d_t\mathbb{Z}, +), \quad t \geq 1,\ 1 < d_1 \mid d_2 \cdots \mid d_t.$$

Thus the polynomial equation $X^{d_t} = 1$, whose additive counterpart is $d_t X = 0$, is satisfied by each of the $d_1 d_2 \cdots d_t$ elements of G; but also, the polynomial has at most as many roots as its degree d_t. Thus $t = 1$ and G is cyclic. □

The proof tacitly relies on a fact from basic algebra:

Lemma 2.2. *Let k be a field. Let $f \in k[X]$ be a nonzero polynomial, and let d denote its degree (thus $d \geq 0$). Then f has at most d roots in k.*

Proof. If f has no roots then we are done. Otherwise let $a \in k$ be a root. Write

$$f(X) = q(X)(X-a) + r(X), \quad \deg(r) < 1 \text{ or } r = 0.$$

Thus $r(X)$ is a constant. Substitute a for X to see that in fact $r = 0$, and so $f(X) = q(X)(X-a)$. Because we are working over a field, any root of f is a or is a root of q, and by induction q has at most $d-1$ roots in k, so we are done. □

The lemma does require that k be a field, not merely a ring. For example, the polynomial $X^2 - 1$ over the ring $\mathbb{Z}/24\mathbb{Z}$ has for its roots

$$\{1, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23\} = (\mathbb{Z}/24\mathbb{Z})^\times.$$

To count the generators of $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$, we establish a handy result that is slightly more general.

Proposition 2.3. *Let n be a positive integer, and let e be an integer. Let $\gamma = \gcd(e, n)$. The map*

$$\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z} \longrightarrow \mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z}, \qquad x \longmapsto ex$$

has

$$\text{image } \langle \gamma + n\mathbb{Z} \rangle, \text{ of order } n/\gamma,$$
$$\text{kernel } \langle n/\gamma + n\mathbb{Z} \rangle, \text{ of order } \gamma.$$

Especially, each $e + n\mathbb{Z}$ where e is coprime to n generates $\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z}$, which therefore has $\varphi(n)$ generators.

Indeed, the image is $\{ex + n\mathbb{Z} : x \in \mathbb{Z}\} = \{ex + ny + n\mathbb{Z} : x, y \in \mathbb{Z}\} = \langle \gamma + n\mathbb{Z} \rangle$. The rest of the proposition follows, or we can see the kernel directly by noting that $n \mid ex$ if and only if $n/\gamma \mid (e/\gamma)x$, which by Euclid's Lemma holds if and only if $n/\gamma \mid x$.

Because $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$ is isomorphic to $\mathbb{Z}/(p-1)\mathbb{Z}$, the proposition shows that if g is a generator then all the generators are the $\varphi(p-1)$ powers g^e where $\gcd(e, p-1) = 1$.

3. Prime Unit Group Structure: Elementary Argument

From above, a nonzero polynomial over $\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$ cannot have more roots than its degree. On the other hand, Fermat's Little Theorem says that the polynomial

$$f(X) = X^{p-1} - 1 \in (\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})[X]$$

has a full contingent of $p-1$ roots in $\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$.

For any divisor d of $p-1$, consider the factorization (in consequence of the finite geometric sum formula)

$$f(X) = X^{p-1} - 1 = (X^d - 1) \sum_{i=0}^{\frac{p-1}{d}-1} X^{id} \stackrel{\text{call}}{=} g(X)h(X).$$

We know that

- f has $p-1$ roots in $\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$,
- g has at most d roots in $\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$,
- h has at most $p-1-d$ roots in $\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$.

It follows that $g(X) = X^d - 1$ where $d \mid p-1$ has d roots in $\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}$.

Now factor $p-1$,

$$p - 1 = \prod q^{e_q}.$$

For each factor q^e of $p-1$,

$$\begin{aligned} &X^{q^e} - 1 && \text{has } q^e \text{ roots in } \mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}, \\ &X^{q^{e-1}} - 1 && \text{has } q^{e-1} \text{ roots in } \mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z}, \end{aligned}$$

and so $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$ contains $q^e - q^{e-1} = \varphi(q^e)$ elements x_q of order q^e. (The *order* of an element is the smallest positive number of times that the element is multiplied by itself to give 1.) Plausibly,

$$\textit{any product} \quad \prod_q x_q \quad \textit{has order} \quad \prod_q q^{e_q} = p - 1,$$

and certainly there are $\varphi(p-1)$ such products. In sum, we have done most of the work of showing

Proposition 3.1. *Let p be prime. Then $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$ is cyclic, with $\varphi(p-1)$ generators.*

The loose end is as follows.

Lemma 3.2. *In a commutative group, consider two elements whose orders are coprime. Then the order of their product is the product of their orders.*

Proof. Let e and f denote the orders of a and b, and let g denote the order of ab. Compute,

$$(ab)^{ef} = (a^e)^f (b^f)^e = 1^f 1^e = 1.$$

Thus $g \mid ef$. Also, using the condition $(e, f) = 1$ for the third implication to follow,

$$(ab)^g = 1 \implies 1 = \left((ab)^g\right)^f = (a^f b^f)^g = a^{fg} \implies e \mid fg \implies e \mid g,$$

and symmetrically $f \mid g$. Thus $ef \mid g$, again because $(e, f) = 1$. Altogether $g = ef$ as claimed. $\square$

4. Odd Prime Power Unit Group Structure: p-Adic Argument

Proposition 4.1. *Let p be an odd prime, and let e be any positive integer. The multiplicative group modulo p^e is cyclic. That is, $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong \mathbb{Z}/p^{e-1}(p-1)\mathbb{Z}$.*

Proof. (Sketch.) We have the result for $e = 1$, so take $e \geq 2$. Because $\varphi(p^e) = p^{e-1}(p-1)$, the structure theorem for finitely generated abelian groups and then the Sun Ze theorem combine to show that $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ takes the form (letting A_n denote an abelian group of order n)

$$(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times = A_{p^{e-1}} \times A_{p-1}.$$

By the Sun Ze Theorem, it suffices to show that each of $A_{p^{e-1}}$ and A_{p-1} is cyclic.

The natural epimorphism $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \longrightarrow (\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$ taking $a+p^e\mathbb{Z}$ to $a+p\mathbb{Z}$ maps $A_{p^{e-1}}$ to 1 in $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$, because the orders of the two groups are coprime but the image is a quotient of the first and a subgroup of the second. Consequently the restriction of the natural epimorphism to A_{p-1} must be an isomorphism, making A_{p-1} cyclic because $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$ is. Further, this discussion has shown that $A_{p^{e-1}}$ is the natural epimorphism's kernel,

$$A_{p^{e-1}} = \{a + p^e\mathbb{Z} \in (\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times : a = 1 \bmod p\}.$$

Working p-adically, we have additive-to-multiplicative group isomorphisms

$$\exp : p^f\mathbb{Z}_p \longrightarrow 1 + p^f\mathbb{Z}_p, \quad f \geq 1,$$

because $\exp(ap^f)$ for any $a \in \mathbb{Z}_p$ begins with $1 + ap^f$, and then for $n \geq 2$,

$$\nu_p\left(\frac{(ap^f)^n}{n!}\right) \geq n\big(f - \frac{1}{p-1}\big) \geq 2\big(f - \frac{1}{2}\big) = 2f - 1 \geq f.$$

Especially, we have the isomorphisms for $f = 1$ and for $f = e$. Thus the surjective composition $p\mathbb{Z}_p \xrightarrow{\exp} 1+p\mathbb{Z}_p \longrightarrow A_{p^{e-1}}$, where the second map is the restriction of the ring map $\mathbb{Z}_p \longrightarrow \mathbb{Z}_p/p^e\mathbb{Z}_p \approx \mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z}$ to the multiplicative group map $1+p\mathbb{Z}_p \longrightarrow (\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$, factors through the quotient of its domain $p\mathbb{Z}_p$ by $p^e\mathbb{Z}_p$,

$$\begin{tikzcd} p\mathbb{Z}_p \arrow[r, "\sim", "\exp"'] \arrow[d] & 1 + p\mathbb{Z}_p \arrow[d, two heads] \\ p\mathbb{Z}_p/p^e\mathbb{Z}_p \arrow[r, two heads] & A_{p^{e-1}} \end{tikzcd}$$

Further, $p\mathbb{Z}_p/p^e\mathbb{Z}_p \approx p\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z} \approx \mathbb{Z}/p^{e-1}\mathbb{Z}$. So the surjection $p\mathbb{Z}_p/p^e\mathbb{Z}_p \longrightarrow A_{p^{e-1}}$ is an isomorphism because the two finite groups have the same order, and then $A_{p^{e-1}}$ is cyclic because $\mathbb{Z}/p^{e-1}\mathbb{Z}$ is. This completes the proof. □

The condition $-1/(p-1) \geq -1/2$ in the proof fails for $p = 2$, but a modification of the argument shows that $(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ has a cyclic subgroup of index 2.

Once one is aware that the truncated exponential series gives an isomorphism $p\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z} \xrightarrow{\sim} A_{p^{e-1}}$, the isomorphism can be confirmed without direct reference to the p-adic exponential. For example with $e = 3$, any $px + p^3\mathbb{Z}$ has image $1 + px + \frac{1}{2}p^2x^2 + p^3\mathbb{Z}$, and similarly $py + p^3\mathbb{Z}$ has image $1 + py + \frac{1}{2}p^2y^2 + p^3\mathbb{Z}$; their sum $p(x+y) + p^3\mathbb{Z}$ maps to $1 + p(x+y) + \frac{1}{2}p^2(x^2 + 2xy + y^2) + p^3\mathbb{Z}$, which is also the product of the images, even though $1 + p(x+y) + \frac{1}{2}p^2(x^2 + 2xy + y^2)$ is not the product of $1 + px + \frac{1}{2}p^2x^2$ and $1 + py + \frac{1}{2}p^2y^2$. This idea underlies the elementary argument to be given next.

5. Odd Prime Power Unit Group Structure: Elementary Argument

Again we show that for any odd prime p and any positive e, the group $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ is cyclic. Here the argument is elementary.

Proof. Let g generate $(\mathbb{Z}/p\mathbb{Z})^\times$. Because the binomial theorem gives

$$(g+p)^{p-1} = g^{p-1} + (p-1)g^{p-2}p \bmod p^2,$$

we have $(g+p)^{p-1} \neq g^{p-1} \bmod p^2$, so in particular

$$g^{p-1} \neq 1 \bmod p^2 \quad \text{or} \quad (g+p)^{p-1} \neq 1 \bmod p^2.$$

After replacing g with $g+p$ if necessary, we may assume that $g^{p-1} \neq 1 \bmod p^2$. Thus we know that

$$g^{p-1} = 1 + k_1 p, \quad p \nmid k_1.$$

Again using the binomial theorem,

$$\begin{aligned} g^{p(p-1)} = (1+k_1p)^p &= 1 + pk_1p + \sum_{j=2}^{p-1} \binom{p}{j} k_1^j p^j + k_1^p p^p \\ &= 1 + k_2 p^2, \quad p \nmid k_2. \end{aligned}$$

The last equality holds because the terms in the sum and the term $k_1^p p^p$ are multiples of p^3. (Here it is relevant that $p > 2$. The assertion fails for $p = 2$, $g = 3$ because of the last term. That is, $3^{2-1} = 1 + 1 \cdot 2$ so that $k_1 = 1$ is not divisible by $p = 2$, but then $3^{2(2-1)} = 9 = 1 + 2 \cdot 2^2$ so that $k_2 = 2$ is.) Once more by the binomial theorem,

$$\begin{aligned} g^{p^2(p-1)} = (1+k_2p^2)^p &= 1 + pk_2p^2 + \sum_{j=2}^{p} \binom{p}{j} k_2^j p^{2j} \\ &= 1 + k_3 p^3, \quad p \nmid k_3, \end{aligned}$$

because the terms in the sum are multiples of p^4. Similarly

$$g^{p^3(p-1)} = 1 + k_4 p^4, \quad p \nmid k_4,$$

and so on, up to

$$g^{p^{e-2}(p-1)} = 1 + k_{e-1} p^{e-1}, \quad p \nmid k_{e-1}.$$

That is,

$$g^{p^{e-2}(p-1)} \neq 1 \bmod p^e.$$

The order of g in $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ must divide $\varphi(p^e) = p^{e-1}(p-1)$. If the order takes the form $p^\varepsilon d$ where $\varepsilon \leq e-1$ and d is a *proper* divisor of $p-1$ then Fermat's Little Theorem ($g^p = g \bmod p$) shows that the relation

$$g^{p^\varepsilon d} = 1 \bmod p^e$$

reduces modulo p to

$$g^d = 1 \bmod p.$$

But this contradicts the fact that g is a generator modulo p. Thus the order of g in $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ takes the form $p^\varepsilon(p-1)$ where $\varepsilon \leq e-1$. The calculation above has shown that $\varepsilon = e-1$, and the proof is complete. ∎

For example, 2 generates $(\mathbb{Z}/5\mathbb{Z})^\times$, and $2^{5-1} = 16 \neq 1 \bmod 5^2$, so in fact 2 generates $(\mathbb{Z}/5^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ for all $e \geq 1$.

A small consequence of the proposition is that because $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ is cyclic for odd p, and because $\varphi(p^e) = p^{e-1}(p-1)$ is even, the equation

$$x^2 = 1 \bmod p^e$$

has two solutions: 1 and $g^{\varphi(p^e)/2}$.

6. Powers of 2 Unit Group Structure

Proposition 6.1. *The structure of the unit group* $(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ *is*

$$(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong \begin{cases} \mathbb{Z}/\mathbb{Z} & \text{if } e = 1, \\ \mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z} & \text{if } e = 2, \\ (\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}) \times (\mathbb{Z}/2^{e-2}\mathbb{Z}) & \text{if } e \geq 3. \end{cases}$$

Specifically, $(\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z})^\times = \{1\}$, $(\mathbb{Z}/4\mathbb{Z})^\times = \{1, 3\}$, *and for* $e \geq 3$,

$$(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong \{\pm 1\} \times \{1, 5, 5^2, \dots, 5^{2^{e-2}-1}\}.$$

Proof. The results for $(\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z})^\times$ and for $(\mathbb{Z}/4\mathbb{Z})^\times$ are readily observable, and so we take $e \geq 3$.

Because $|(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times| = \varphi(2^e) = 2^{e-1}$, we need to show that

$$5^{2^{e-3}} \neq 1 \bmod 2^e, \qquad 5^{2^{e-2}} = 1 \bmod 2^e,$$

Similarly, to the previous argument, start from

$$5^{2^0} = 5 = 1 + k_2 2^2, \quad 2 \nmid k_2,$$

and thus

$$5^{2^1} = 5^2 = 1 + 2k_2 2^2 + k_2^2 2^4 = 1 + k_3 2^3, \quad 2 \nmid k_3,$$

and then

$$5^{2^2} = 5^4 = 1 + 2k_3 2^3 + k_3^2 2^6 = 1 + k_4 2^4, \quad 2 \nmid k_4,$$

and so on up to

$$5^{2^{e-3}} = 1 + k_{e-1} 2^{e-1}, \quad 2 \nmid k_{e-1},$$

and finally

$$5^{2^{e-2}} = 1 + k_e 2^e, \quad 2 \nmid k_e.$$

The last two displays show that

$$5^{2^{e-3}} \neq 1 \bmod 2^e, \qquad 5^{2^{e-2}} = 1 \bmod 2^e.$$

That is, 5 generates half of $(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$. To show that the full group is

$$(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong \{\pm 1\} \times \{1, 5, 5^2, \dots, 5^{2^{e-2}-1}\},$$

suppose that

$$(-1)^a 5^b = (-1)^c 5^d \bmod 2^e, \quad a, c \in \{0, 1\},\ b, d \in \{0, \cdots, 2^{e-2} - 1\}.$$

Inspect modulo 4 to see that $c = a$. So now $5^b = 5^d \bmod 2^e$, and the restrictions on b and d show that $d = b$ as well. $\square$

The group $(\mathbb{Z}/2^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ is not cyclic for $e \geq 3$ because all of its elements have order dividing 2^{e-2}.

The equation

$$x^2 = 1 \bmod 2^e$$

has one solution if $e = 1$, two solutions if $e = 2$, and four solutions if $e \geq 3$,

$$(1,1), \quad (-1,1), \quad (1,5^{2^{e-3}}), \quad (-1,5^{2^{e-3}}).$$

With this information in hand, the Sun Ze Theorem shows that the number of solutions of the equation

$$x^2 = 1 \bmod n, \qquad (\text{where } n = 2^e \prod_{i=1}^{g} p_i^{e_i})$$

is

$$\begin{cases} 2^g & \text{if } e = 0, 1, \\ 2 \cdot 2^g & \text{if } e = 2, \\ 4 \cdot 2^g & \text{if } e \geq 3. \end{cases}$$

For example, if $n = 120 = 2^3 \cdot 3 \cdot 5$ then the number of solutions is 16.

Especially, the fact that for odd $n = \prod_{i=1}^{g} p_i^{e_i}$ there are $2^g - 1$ proper square roots of 1 modulo n has to do with the effectiveness of the Miller–Rabin primality test. Recall that the test makes use of a diagnostic base $b \in \{1, \ldots, n-1\}$ and of the factorization $n - 1 = 2^s m$, computing (everything modulo n)

$$b^m, \quad (b^m)^2, \quad ((b^m)^2)^2, \quad \ldots, \quad (b^{m2^{s-2}})^2 = b^{n-1}.$$

Of course, if $b^m = 1$ then all the squaring is doing nothing, while if $b^{n-1} \neq 1$ then n is not prime by Fermat's Little Theorem. The interesting case is when $b^m \neq 1$ but $b^{n-1} = 1$, so that repeatedly squaring b^m does give 1: in this case, squaring b^m one fewer time gives a proper square root of 1. If n has g distinct prime factors then we expect this square root to be -1 only $1/(2^g - 1)$ of the time. Thus, if the process turns up the square root -1 for many values of b then almost certainly $g = 1$, i.e., n is a prime power. Of course, if n is a prime power but not prime then we hope that it isn't a Fermat pseudoprime base b for many bases b, and the Miller–Rabin will diagnose this.

7. Cyclic Unit Groups $(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times$

Consider a positive nonunit integer

$$n = \prod_i p_i^{e_i}.$$

Recall the multiplicative component of the Sun Ze Theorem,

$$(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times \xrightarrow{\sim} \prod (\mathbb{Z}/p^{e_p}\mathbb{Z})^\times, \qquad a \bmod n \longmapsto (a \bmod p_1^{e_1}, \cdots, a \bmod p_k^{e_k}).$$

Consequently, the order of a divides the least common multiple of the orders of the multiplicand-groups,

$$\mathrm{lcm}\{\varphi(p_1^{e_1}), \cdots, \varphi(p_k^{e_k})\},$$

and thus a cannot conceivably have order $\varphi(n)$ unless all of the $\varphi(p_i^{e_i})$ are coprime.

For each odd p, the totient $\varphi(p^e)$ is even for all $e \geq 1$. So for $(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times$ to be cyclic, n can have at most one odd prime divisor. Also, $2 \mid \varphi(2^e)$ for all $e \geq 2$. So the possible unit groups $(\mathbb{Z}/n\mathbb{Z})^\times$ that could be cyclic are

$$(\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z})^\times, \quad (\mathbb{Z}/4\mathbb{Z})^\times, \quad (\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times, \quad (\mathbb{Z}/2p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times.$$

We know that the first three groups in fact are cyclic. For $n = 2p^e$, the Sun Ze Theorem gives

$$(\mathbb{Z}/2p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong (\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z})^\times \times (\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times \cong (\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times,$$

showing that the fourth group is cyclic as well. If g generates $(\mathbb{Z}/p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$ then whichever of g and $g + p^e$ is odd generates $(\mathbb{Z}/2p^e\mathbb{Z})^\times$.