An Introduction to Nakayama's Lemma

William Chuang

1 Objective

By the end of this lecture, you should understand the statement of Nakayama's Lemma, why it is important in module theory, and see a few examples of how it is applied.

2 Motivation and Background

2.1 Quick Recap: Modules and Ideals

- **Modules:** Think of modules as a generalization of vector spaces where scalars come from a ring R instead of a field.
  - *Example:* $\mathbb{Z}$-modules are just abelian groups.
- **Ideals:** An ideal is a special subset of a ring that absorbs multiplication by ring elements.
  - *Example:* In $\mathbb{Z}$, the set $2\mathbb{Z}$ is an ideal.

2.2 Why Nakayama's Lemma?

- It provides a powerful tool for understanding the structure of finitely generated modules over a ring.
- It often allows us to conclude that if a module "shrinks" in a certain way (using an ideal), then the module must be trivial.
- It is especially useful in algebraic geometry and commutative algebra.

3 Statement of Nakayama's Lemma

There are several equivalent formulations. We discuss two common ones.

3.1 Nakayama's Lemma (Version 1)

Statement: Let M be a finitely generated module over a ring R with an ideal I contained in the Jacobson radical $\mathrm{Jac}(R)$ (for instance, I might be a maximal ideal). If $IM = M$, then $M = 0$.

Key points:

- **Finitely generated:** M is generated by a finite set.
- **Jacobson radical:** Recall that an element in $\mathrm{Jac}(R)$ is "close" to being noninvertible. If I is inside $\mathrm{Jac}(R)$, it has a strong "shrinking" property on modules.

3.2 Nakayama's Lemma (Version 2)

Statement: Let M be a finitely generated module over R and let N be a submodule such that $M = N + IM$. Then there exists an element $r \in R$ with $r \equiv 1 \pmod{I}$ (meaning $r - 1 \in I$) such that $rM \subseteq N$. In particular, if $N \subseteq IM$, then $M = IM$ implies $M = 0$.

Interpretation: This version tells us that if a module can be "covered" by a proper submodule together with the action of an ideal, then the module is "almost" the submodule. Under the right conditions (especially when dealing with maximal ideals), this forces M to be zero if the process repeats.

4 Understanding the Statement

4.1 Intuition

Imagine a module M generated by a few "building blocks". If multiplying each generator by elements in a "small" ideal I can recover every element of M, then these generators aren't really contributing any "new" elements; they are "overpowered" by I. In the extreme case, this forces all the generators (and hence the whole module) to be zero.

4.2 The Role of Finite Generation

The finite generation condition is crucial. If M were not finitely generated, the lemma might fail. Think of it like having an infinite toolbox—the argument that "one tool is enough" falls apart if you have infinitely many.

5 Example Application

5.1 A Simple Example

Let R be a local ring (a ring with a unique maximal ideal $\mathfrak{m}$) and let M be a finitely generated R-module. Suppose we have a generating set $\{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n\}$ for M and assume that each x_i is in $\mathfrak{m}M$. Then, every element of M can be written as a combination of the x_i's, but since each x_i is "small" (i.e., in $\mathfrak{m}M$), the entire module is "small". Nakayama's Lemma then implies that $M = 0$.

Why is this useful? This type of argument is used to show that certain modules are "minimal" in the sense that if a generating set can be "reduced" further, the module may collapse to zero. It also helps in proving that a given generating set is minimal.

6 Sketch of a Proof (Idea Only)

While a full proof requires some careful algebra, here is the intuition for Version 1:

1. **Assumption:** M is finitely generated and $IM = M$.
2. **Choose Generators:** Let $x_1, \ldots, x_n$ be generators of M.
3. **Express Generators:** Each x_i can be written as a combination of elements in IM, say,

$$x_i = a_{i1}x_1 + \cdots + a_{in}x_n \quad \text{with } a_{ij} \in I.$$

4. **Matrix Form:** This gives a matrix equation that, when rewritten, suggests the identity matrix is "almost" invertible modulo I.

5. **Invertibility in R/I:** Since I is in the Jacobson radical, the matrix $I - A$ (with entries in I) is invertible, forcing the only solution to be $x_i = 0$ for all i.

6. **Conclusion:** Thus, $M = 0$.

This sketch hides some technical details, but the key idea is using the finite generation to set up a system of linear equations and then leveraging properties of the Jacobson radical.

7 Why It Matters

- **Structural Results:** Nakayama's Lemma is a key tool in proving many foundational results in commutative algebra and algebraic geometry. It helps us understand how local properties (like being "small" near a maximal ideal) control the entire structure of a module.

- **Practical Use:** In practice, you might use Nakayama's Lemma to show that a set of generators is minimal or to prove that a module is trivial under certain conditions.

8 Summary and Conclusion

- **Recap:** We introduced Nakayama's Lemma in two forms, explored its intuition, saw an example, and outlined the key idea behind its proof.

- **Key Takeaway:** Nakayama's Lemma tells us that in the presence of a "small" ideal (like a maximal ideal), a finitely generated module that can be "absorbed" by that ideal must be trivial.

Feel free to ask questions if any part of the lemma or its proof is unclear. Understanding these ideas will build a strong foundation for more advanced topics in algebra!