18.175: Lecture 8

Weak laws and moment-generating/characteristic functions

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Outline

Moment generating functions

Weak law of large numbers: Markov/Chebyshev approach

Weak law of large numbers: characteristic function approach

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- If $b > 0$ and $t > 0$ then $E[e^{tX}] \geq E[e^{t \min\{X,b\}}] \geq P\{X \geq b\} e^{tb}$.
- If X takes both positive and negative values with positive probability then $M(t)$ grows at least exponentially fast in $|t|$ as $|t| \to \infty$.

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- Another way to think of this: write $e^{tX} = 1 + tX + \frac{t^2X^2}{2!} + \frac{t^3X^3}{3!} + \ldots$.
- Taking expectations gives $E[e^{tX}] = 1 + tm_1 + \frac{t^2m_2}{2!} + \frac{t^3m_3}{3!} + \ldots$, where m_k is the kth moment. The kth derivative at zero is m_k.

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- By independence, $M_Z(t) = E[e^{t(X+Y)}] = E[e^{tX}e^{tY}] = E[e^{tX}]E[e^{tY}] = M_X(t)M_Y(t)$ for all t.

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- In other words, adding independent random variables corresponds to multiplying moment generating functions.

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- This a big reason for studying moment generating functions. It helps us understand what happens when we sum up a lot of independent copies of the same random variable.

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- Answer: Yes. $M_Z(t) = E[e^{tZ}] = E[e^{tX+bt}] = e^{bt}M_X(t)$.
- Latter answer is the special case of $M_Z(t) = M_X(t)M_Y(t)$ where Y is the constant random variable b.

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- Answer: $M_X(0) = 1$ (as is true for any X) but otherwise $M_X(t)$ is infinite for all $t \neq 0$.
- Informal statement: moment generating functions are not defined for distributions with fat tails.

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- **Proof:** Note that $(X - \mu)^2$ is a non-negative random variable and $P\{|X - \mu| \geq k\} = P\{(X - \mu)^2 \geq k^2\}$. Now apply Markov's inequality with $a = k^2$.

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- **Markov:** if $E[X]$ is small, then it is not too likely that X is large.
- **Chebyshev:** if $\sigma^2 = \mathrm{Var}[X]$ is small, then it is not too likely that X is far from its mean.

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- Indeed, **weak law of large numbers** states that for all $\epsilon > 0$ we have $\lim_{n\to\infty} P\{|A_n - \mu| > \epsilon\} = 0$.
- Example: as n tends to infinity, the probability of seeing more than $.50001n$ heads in n fair coin tosses tends to zero.

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- By Chebyshev $P\{|A_n - \mu| \geq \epsilon\} \leq \frac{\mathrm{Var}[A_n]}{\epsilon^2} = \frac{\sigma^2}{n\epsilon^2}$.
- No matter how small ϵ is, RHS will tend to zero as n gets large.

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- Chebyshev/Markov argument works whenever variables are uncorrelated (does not actually require independence).

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- Probability first bin contains no ball is $(1-1/n)^{\alpha n} \approx e^{-\alpha}$.
- We can explicitly compute variance of the number of bins with no balls. Allows us to show that fraction of bins with no balls concentrates about its expectation, which is $e^{-\alpha}$.

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- Assume X_n are i.i.d. non-negative instances of random variable X with finite mean. Can one prove law of large numbers for these?
- Try truncating. Fix large N and write $A = X1_{X>N}$ and $B = X1_{X\le N}$ so that $X = A + B$. Choose N so that EB is very small. Law of large numbers holds for A.

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- In this strange and delightful case A_n actually has the same probability distribution as X.

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- One standard proof uses characteristic functions.

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- And if X has an mth moment then $E[X^m] = i^m\phi_X^{(m)}(0)$.
- But characteristic functions have an advantage: they are well defined at all t for all random variables X.

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for all t, then X_n converge in law to X.
- By this theorem, we can prove weak law of large numbers by showing $\lim_{n\to\infty} \phi_{A_n}(t) = \phi_\mu(t) = e^{it\mu}$ for all t. When $\mu = 0$, amounts to showing $\lim_{n\to\infty} \phi_{A_n}(t) = 1$ for all t.
- **Moment generating analog:** if moment generating functions $M_{X_n}(t)$ are defined for all t and n and, for all t, $\lim_{n\to\infty} M_{X_n}(t) = M_X(t)$, then X_n converge in law to X.

Proof sketch for weak law of large numbers, finite mean case

- As above, let X_i be i.i.d. instances of random variable X with mean zero. Write $A_n := \frac{X_1+X_2+\ldots+X_n}{n}$. Weak law of large numbers holds for i.i.d. instances of X if and only if it holds for i.i.d. instances of $X-\mu$. Thus it suffices to prove the weak law in the mean zero case.

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- Write $g(t) = \log \phi_X(t)$ so $\phi_X(t) = e^{g(t)}$. Then $g(0)=0$ and (by chain rule) $g'(0) = \lim_{\epsilon\to 0}\frac{g(\epsilon)-g(0)}{\epsilon} = \lim_{\epsilon\to 0}\frac{g(\epsilon)}{\epsilon} = 0$.

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- Now $\phi_{A_n}(t) = \phi_X(t/n)^n = e^{ng(t/n)}$. Since $g(0)=g'(0)=0$ we have $\lim_{n\to\infty} ng(t/n) = \lim_{n\to\infty} t\frac{g(\frac{t}{n})}{\frac{t}{n}} = 0$ if t is fixed. Thus $\lim_{n\to\infty} e^{ng(t/n)} = 1$ for all t.

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