

Conditional Exponential Distributions: A Worked Example

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1 Conditional Exponential Distributions

Suppose we want to model the amount of time one will have to wait for a taxi pickup based on the location and the time. The exponential distribution is a natural candidate for this situation. The exponential distribution is a continuous distribution supported on $[0, \infty)$. The set of all exponential probability density functions is given by

$$\text{ExpDists} = \{p_\lambda(y) = \lambda e^{-\lambda y} 1(y \in [0, \infty)) \mid \lambda \in (0, \infty)\}.$$

Let $x \in \mathbf{R}^d$ represent the input features from which we want to predict an exponential distribution. We can represent an element of ExpDists by the parameter λ .

1.1 GLM Approach

We will start with a “**generalized linear model**” (GLM) approach, in which for a given input x , we predict $\lambda = \psi(w^T x)$ for some function ψ and some parameter vector $w \in \mathbf{R}^d$.

1. In a GLM, the function ψ is chosen by the data scientist as part of the model choice. Suggest a reasonable function ψ to map $w^T x$ to λ . Then write an expression for $p_w(y \mid x)$, the predicted probability density function conditioned on x . Because of subsequent problems, you are encouraged to choose a function that is differentiable.

Solution: Since $\lambda \in (0, \infty)$, the range of ψ should also be $(0, \infty)$. Functions that are monotonically increasing as a function of the score

$w^T x$ are preferred, as is differentiability. Thus we will choose $\psi(\cdot) = \exp(\cdot)$. The predicted probability density for a given x is

$$p_w(y | x) = e^{w^T x} e^{-\exp(w^T x)y}$$

for $y \geq 0$ and 0 otherwise.

2. Once ψ is chosen, $w \in \mathbf{R}^d$ is determined by maximum likelihood on a training set, say $(x_1, y_1), \dots, (x_n, y_n)$ sampled i.i.d. $P_{\mathcal{X} \times \mathcal{Y}}$, where $x_i \in \mathbf{R}^d$ and $y_i \in [0, \infty)$ for $i = 1, \dots, n$. Give the optimization problem you would solve to fit the GLM.

Solution: By independence, the likelihood for the dataset is

$$\prod_{i=1}^n p_w(y_i | x_i) = \prod_{i=1}^n e^{w^T x_i} e^{-\exp(w^T x_i)y_i}$$

and the log-likelihood is

$$J(w) = \log \left[\prod_{i=1}^n p_w(y_i | x_i) \right] = \sum_{i=1}^n [w^T x_i - y_i \exp(w^T x_i)].$$

Maximizing the likelihood is equivalent to maximizing the log-likelihood. The optimization problem to solve is

$$w^* = \arg \max_{w \in \mathbf{R}^d} J(w).$$

It's a maximum because we want the maximum likelihood. We can also look for $\arg \min_{w \in \mathbf{R}^d} [-J(w)]$, to be back in our usual minimization setting.

3. Is $-J(w)$ convex?

Solution: Yes. $w^T x_i$ is an affine function of w (in fact, it is linear). $\exp(\cdot)$ is a convex function. The composition of a convex function and an affine function is convex. [You can also just remember that $\exp(f(x))$ is convex whenever $f(x)$ is.]. $y_i \geq 0$, so $y_i \exp(w^T x_i)$ is convex, and subtracting off $w^T x_i$ (a linear function) is still convex. [Since $-w^T x_i$ is also convex, we can view $y_i \exp(w^T x_i) + (-w^T x_i)$ as the sum of two convex functions. Finally, the sum over i is a nonnegative [convex] combination of convex functions, and so it's convex.

4. Give a numerical method for finding w^* . No need to specify a step size plan or a termination plan. Just give the step directions you will use.

Solution: We'll use SGD. At each step we'll choose a random data point (x_i, y_i) and we'll take the step

$$w \leftarrow w + \eta [x_i - y_i \exp(w^T x_i) x_i],$$

for some step size η .

1.2 GBM Approach

Suppose we are not convinced that $w^T x$ extracts enough information from x to make a good prediction of λ , and we want to use a nonlinear function of x . We can use a gradient boosting approach for this. Rather than predicting $x \mapsto \psi(w^T x)$, where w is learned from the data, we will now predict $x \mapsto \psi(f(x))$, where f is some more general function learned from the data.

1. Write our new objective function $J(f)$, where f is now the function described above.

Solution:

$$J(f) = \sum_{i=1}^n [f(x_i) - y_i \exp(f(x_i))].$$

2. We can find f using gradient boosting. Let \mathcal{H} be our base hypothesis space of real-valued functions. In each step of gradient boosting, we choose a function $h \in \mathcal{H}$ that solves a particular regression problem. Give this regression problem.

Solution: For gradient boosting, we need to compute the gradient at the datapoints. So

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial f(x_i)} J(f) = 1 - y_i \exp[f(x_i)].$$

This is the unconstrained gradient. We want to find the best fit to this gradient direction among functions in \mathcal{H} . This is the following regression problem:

$$h^* = \arg \min_{h \in \mathcal{H}} \sum_{i=1}^n [(1 - y_i \exp[f(x_i)]) - h(x_i)]^2$$

3. Give the full GBM algorithm for finding the maximum likelihood function f . No need to specify a stopping criterion. You may assume that the algorithm takes M steps, if that it makes the algorithm easier to express :

Solution:

(a) Initialize $f_0(x) = 0$.

(b) For $m = 1$ to M :

i. Compute:

$$\mathbf{g}_m = (1 - y_i \exp[f_{m-1}(x_i)])_{i=1}^n$$

ii. Fit regression model to \mathbf{g}_m :

$$h_m = \arg \min_{h \in \mathcal{F}} \sum_{i=1}^n ((\mathbf{g}_m)_i - h(x_i))^2.$$

A. Choose fixed step size $\nu_m = \nu \in (0, 1]$, or take

$$\nu_m = \arg \max_{\nu > 0} J(f_{m-1} + \nu h_m).$$

B. Take the step:

$$f_m(x) = f_{m-1}(x) + \nu_m h_m(x)$$