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# Commonsense Explanations of Sparsity, Zipf Law, and Nash's Bargaining Solution

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## Abstract

As econometric models become more and more accurate and more and more mathematically complex, they also become less and less intuitively clear and convincing. To make these models more convincing, it is desirable to supplement the corresponding mathematics with commonsense explanations. In this paper, we provide such explanation for three economics-related concepts: sparsity (as in LASSO), Zipf's Law, and Nash's bargaining solution.

## 1 Formulation of the Problem

**Need for commonsense explanations.** In the 19 century, from Adam Smith through Karl Marx, economic phenomena were described by relatively simple intuitively clear formulas. However, it was well understood that these formulas provide, at best, a qualitative understanding, and qualitative predictions.

Economics and finance are complex phenomena, so not surprisingly, simple models do not provide a good quantitative description of these phenomena. Starting with the 20 century, new models appeared that allow us, in many cases, to make reasonable accurate predictions. The corresponding models – that more adequately describe economic and financial phenomena – are often very mathematically complicated, far from common sense.

And here lies a problem. Since models are complicated, requiring complex math beyond what most people know, people in general – and politicians in particular – do not fully trust these models. This lack of complete trust is understandable, since sometimes, predictions of previous models turn out to be wrong, and decisions based on these predictions made crisis situations worse. It

is therefore desirable to come up with commonsense explanations for the current models – or at least for the major assumptions behind these models and for the main features of these models.

This need is similar to the well-publicized need for explainable AI (see, e.g., [2, 24, 30]) – for example, a female entrepreneur who was denied a bank loan by an AI-computer program would like to make sure that this denial was based on inadequate state of her company and not on the fact that, since in the past, most loans were given to men, the statistics-based system automatically continues this trend.

**What we do in this paper.** Of course, the goal of having explainable econometrics is complex, it requires joint efforts of many researchers. In this paper, we provide just three examples of the desired commonsense explanations: namely, we provide commonsense explanation for sparsity, for Zipf law, and for Nash’s bargaining solution.

## 2 Commonsense Explanation of Sparsity

**What is sparsity: a brief reminder.** Econometric analysis often starts with trying to use linear regression: we try to predict the value  $y(t+1)$  of the desirable quantity  $y$  at the next moment of time  $t + 1$  (e.g., next month or next year) as a linear combination of the values  $x_1(t), \dots, x_n(t)$  of different quantities at the current moment of time – and maybe of their past values  $x_i(t - 1), x_i(t - 2), \dots$

Usually, just to be on the safe side, we add as many quantities  $x_i$  and as many past moments of time as possible, realizing that some of these values may be irrelevant. In the process of regression, it usually turns out that many of these variables are indeed irrelevant – we can see it by observing that the coefficients at these variables are close to 0.

The problem with using the usual linear regression methods for linear regression is that, since the data is noisy, and linear dependence is approximate, we do not get perfect match, and thus, do not get exactly 0 values even where there is no dependence, and these erroneously non-zero value make the resulting predictions much less accurate. Much more accurate predictions can be obtained if we explicitly require, from the very beginning, that a large number of the coefficients be zero, i.e., that the dependence is *sparse*. This is the main idea behind, e.g., the LASSO method [1, 16, 31].

*Comment.* Sparsity is not limited to economics and finance, it is a useful tool in data processing in general; see, e.g., [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20, 22, 26, 32, 33].

**Why do we need a commonsense explanation for sparsity.** At first glance, what we described makes sense, but one can also raise a serious counter-argument: in economics and in finance, everything is inter-related, often, a small event across the world causes some stocks to go up or down, so why would there be zero coefficients at all?

From this viewpoint, if one looks seriously at the previous text, this text does not provide any commonsense explanation, just states the empirical fact that the resulting best-fit formulas are often sparse.

It would thus be nice to have some commonsense explanation for this empirical phenomenon of sparsity.

**Continuity: main commonsense feature underlying our explanation.**

Our commonsense explanation is based on a reasonable feature of *continuity* – that small changes in one or several quantities should lead to small changes in other quantities.

Of course, there are extreme situations when there is no continuity: e.g., if the amount of money that a company needs to pay right away is slightly smaller than its current amount of liquid assets, it can easily pay its creditors and suppliers, while if the needed amount is slightly larger than what is available, the company may be in trouble. But even this situation is more purely theoretical: if the difference is very small, the company can easily take a loan or negotiate a payment extension with its suppliers – and if they refuse because of the bad financial history of this company, this means that the trouble is in this bad history and *not* in the minor inability to fully pay the debts right away.

**Let us describe continuity in precise terms.** Suppose that we have a linear relation between the input quantities  $x_1, \dots, x_n$  and the desired quantity  $y$ :

$$y = a_0 + a_1 \cdot x_1 + \dots + a_n \cdot x_n. \tag{1}$$

Continuity means, in particular, that if we make a small change in one or several values  $x_i$ , i.e., replace the original value  $x_i$  with a new value  $x_i + \Delta x_i$ , where  $|\Delta x_i| \leq \varepsilon$  for some  $\varepsilon > 0$ , then the resulting change  $\Delta y$  in  $y$  must also be small, i.e., smaller than  $\delta > 0$  for some  $\delta \approx \varepsilon$ . (It may be tempting to take  $\delta = \varepsilon$ , but, as we will see, this is not possible.)

Similarly, if we analyze the dependence of  $y$  on one of the variables  $x_i$  – i.e., if we analyze how much we need to change  $x_i$  to reach the desired change in  $y$  – then we can formulate a similar requirement: that for each small change  $\Delta y$  (when  $|\Delta y| \leq \varepsilon$ ), the corresponding change  $\Delta x_i$  should also be small:  $|\Delta x_i| \leq \delta$ .

*Comment.* Of course, this requirement only makes sense only when a change in  $x_i$  can actually change  $y$ , i.e., when the corresponding coefficient  $a_i$  is different from 0.

**What we can conclude from continuity.** If we change one of the variables  $x_i$  by  $\Delta x_i = \varepsilon$ , then the value of  $y$  changes by  $\Delta y = a_i \cdot \Delta x_i = a_i \cdot \varepsilon$ . So, the requirement that  $|\Delta y| \leq \delta$  takes the form  $|a_i \cdot \varepsilon| \leq \delta$ , i.e., that

$$|a_i| \leq \frac{\delta}{\varepsilon}. \tag{2}$$

Similarly, for the indices  $i$  for which  $a_i \neq 0$ , the change in  $y$  caused by a change  $\Delta x_i$  in  $x_i$  is equal to  $\Delta y = a_i \cdot \Delta x_i$ . Thus, to get the change  $\Delta y = \varepsilon$ ,

we need to take  $\Delta x_i = \frac{\Delta y}{a_i} = \frac{\varepsilon}{a_i}$ . The requirement that  $|\Delta x_i| \leq \delta$  thus takes the form  $\left| \frac{\varepsilon}{a_i} \right| \leq \delta$ , i.e., equivalently,

$$\frac{\varepsilon}{\delta} \leq |a_i|. \quad (3)$$

This, by the way, shows why we cannot take  $\delta = \varepsilon$  – in this case, from (2) and (3), we would conclude that  $|a_i| \leq 1$  and  $1 \leq |a_i|$ , so  $|a_i| = 1$  – but empirically, we can have different values  $a_i$ . Moreover, we must have  $\varepsilon < \delta$  – otherwise, if  $\varepsilon > \delta$ , then (2) and (3) would lead to two inconsistent inequalities  $|a_i| < 1$  and  $1 < |a_i|$ .

So far, we considered the case when we change only one input. What if we change all of them, e.g., if we take  $\Delta x_i = \text{sign}(a_i) \cdot \varepsilon$  for all  $i$ ? In this case, we have

$$\Delta y = \sum_{i=1}^n a_i \cdot \text{sign}(a_i) \cdot \varepsilon = \sum_{i=1}^n |a_i| \cdot \varepsilon = \varepsilon \cdot \sum_{i=1}^n |a_i|.$$

In this formula, we can safely ignore all the indices for which  $a_i = 0$ , so

$$\Delta y = \varepsilon \cdot \sum_{i:a_i \neq 0} |a_i|.$$

Our continuity requirement is that  $|\Delta y| \leq \delta$ . In this example,  $\Delta y > 0$ , so  $|\Delta y| = \Delta y$ , and the desired inequality takes the form

$$\varepsilon \cdot \sum_{i:a_i \neq 0} |a_i| \leq \delta. \quad (4)$$

We already know that  $\frac{\varepsilon}{\delta} \leq |a_i|$ , thus,

$$n_i \cdot \frac{\varepsilon}{\delta} \leq \sum_{i:a_i \neq 0} |a_i|, \quad (5)$$

where by  $n_i$ , we denotes the number of non-zero coefficients  $a_i$ . Multiplying both side of inequality (5) by  $\varepsilon$ , we conclude that

$$n_i \cdot \frac{\varepsilon^2}{\delta} \leq \varepsilon \cdot \sum_{i:a_i \neq 0} |a_i|. \quad (6)$$

By combining inequalities (4) and (6), we conclude that

$$n_i \cdot \frac{\varepsilon^2}{\delta} \leq \delta,$$

i.e., equivalently, that

$$n_i \leq \frac{\delta^2}{\varepsilon^2}.$$

Since  $\delta \approx \varepsilon$ , this means that the ratio  $\frac{\delta^2}{\varepsilon^2}$  is reasonably small, so the number  $n_i$  of non-zero coefficients is small – which is exactly sparsity!

### 3 Commonsense Explanation of Zipf's Law

**Zipf's law: a brief reminder.** This law is named after a scientist who discovered that in linguistics: if we order all the words from a natural language from the most frequent to the least frequent ones, then the frequency  $p_n$  of the  $n$ -th word in this order is approximately equal to  $c/n$ . This law turned out to be ubiquitous, it is applicable to many phenomena, including economic ones; see, e.g., [9, 21]. For example, it describes the distribution of companies by size.

How can we explain this law in commonsense terms?

**Main idea behind our explanation.** The fact that we sorted objects (words, companies, etc.) in the reverse order according to their frequency means that:

- if  $m < n$ , then  $p_n < p_m$ , and
- vice versa, if  $p_n < p_m$ , then  $m < n$ .

These formal statements are not very informative: they are satisfied for Zipf's law  $p_n = c/n$ , but they could be satisfied for all other possible monotonic sequences, e.g.,  $p_n = c/n^2$  or  $p_n = \exp(-c \cdot n)$ .

However, a natural commonsense understanding of these two conditions goes beyond their formal definition. It is natural, e.g., to also conclude that  $m$  is somewhat smaller than  $n$ , then  $p_n$  is somewhat smaller than  $p_m$ , and that if  $m$  is much smaller than  $n$ , then  $p_n$  is much smaller than  $p_m$ .

This commonsense understanding can be described as follows: intuitively, a statement that  $A$  implies  $B$  means not only that if  $A$  is true then  $B$  is true, it also means that, more generally, the degree  $d(B)$  to which we believe in  $B$  is at least as large as the degree  $d(A)$  to which we believe in  $A$ .

*Comment.* In principle, we could formalize the notion of a degree – e.g., by using fuzzy logic [3, 18, 23, 28, 29, 34] – but let us stick to commonsense ideas, and do not go into formalization unless it becomes necessary.

**Resulting explanation.** From the viewpoint of the above understanding, the two implication statements mean the following:

- the first statement means that the degree  $d(p_n < p_m)$  to which we believe that  $p_n < p_m$  is greater than or equal to the degree of belief  $d(m < n)$  that  $m < n$ :

$$d(m < n) \leq d(p_n < p_m);$$

- similarly, the second statement means that the degree  $d(m < n)$  to which we believe that  $m < n$  is greater than or equal to the degree of belief  $d(p_n < p_m)$  that  $p_n < p_m$ :

$$d(p_n < p_m) \leq d(m < n).$$

The above two inequalities imply that these degree are equal:

$$d(p_n < p_m) = d(m < n). \tag{7}$$

How do we describe this degree? In principle, this can be done differently, but in economic applications, this is usually understood in relative – percent – terms. If we say that someone started earning 10K more per year, we are not explaining anything: it may be going to 0 to 10K, or it may be a miserable increase from 300K to 310K. A much better commonsense understanding is provided by the ratio of two numbers: no matter what we started with, a 3% increase is not much, a 20% increase is always significant, and a 100% increase is always drastic.

Thus, in economic applications, the degree  $d(a < b)$  to which  $a$  is smaller than  $b$  is determined only by the ratio, i.e.,  $d(a < b) = f(b/a)$  for some increasing function  $f(x)$ . From this viewpoint, the formula (7) takes the form

$$f\left(\frac{p_m}{p_n}\right) = f\left(\frac{n}{m}\right).$$

Since the function  $f(x)$  is increasing – the larger the ratio  $b/a$ , the more we are convincing that  $b$  is larger – this equality is equivalent to

$$\frac{p_m}{p_n} = \frac{n}{m}.$$

If we move all the terms containing  $m$  to one side and all the terms containing  $n$  to the other side, we conclude that  $m \cdot p_m = n \cdot p_n$  for all  $m$  and  $n$ . This product is the same for all  $n$ , i.e., is a constant:  $n \cdot p_n = c$ . Thus,  $p_n = c/n$ , exactly the Zipf's law!

## 4 Commonsense Explanation of Nash's Bargaining Solution

**Nash's bargaining solution: a brief reminder.** In many real-life situations, the outcome depends on the actions of several actors. A classical example is several countries producing oil. Depending on their actions, they may get different gains  $(g_1, \dots, g_n)$ . In some possible outcomes, one actor gets more, in other outcomes, another actor gets more. For example, if one country cuts off its production and others don't, other countries will benefit.

If the actors do not coordinate their action – e.g., if we all produce too much oil, the price of oil will dive, and they will all lose. So, they need to come up with a joint compromise solution.

A Nobelist John Nash used some – rather complex – math – to show that the best strategy is to maximize the product  $\prod_{i=1}^n g_i$  of the participants' gains; see, e.g., [19, 25, 27].

**It is desirable to have a commonsense explanation.** From the mathematical viewpoint, it is a good solution, but from the commonsense viewpoint, multiplying gains does not make any sense.

How can we explain this idea in commonsense terms?

**Main idea and the resulting explanation.** How can we gauge the quality of a solution? For athletes, a natural measure of the athlete’s quality is the number of other athletes whose performance is lower. For standardized tests, the person’s results are usually described by the percentage of test takers who had worse performance. This way it is clear that if this percentage is 3%, the graduate program applicant is not very good, while if it is 99.9%, we should accept this person right away.

Similarly, we can gauge the quality of an alternative  $g = (g_1, \dots, g_n)$  by counting how many alternatives are worse, i.e., how many there are tuples  $g' = (g'_1, \dots, g'_n) \neq g$  which are clearly worse, i.e., for which  $g'_i \leq g_i$  for all  $i$  (since  $g' \neq g$ , this implies that  $g'_i < g_i$  for some  $i$ ).

From the purely mathematical viewpoint, there are infinitely many such tuples. In practice, however, there is some “quantum” here, the smallest amount  $\varepsilon > 0$  below which the difference is not noticeable. It may be 1 cent if we talk about people, it may be 1 million dollars if we talk about oil producing companies.

From this viewpoint, there are  $g_1/\varepsilon$  values  $0, \varepsilon, 2\varepsilon, \dots$  which are smaller than or equal to  $g_1$ . For each of these values, there are  $g_2/\varepsilon$  values which are smaller than or equal to  $g_2$  – i.e.,  $(g_1/\varepsilon) \cdot (g_2/\varepsilon)$  possible combinations. Similarly, we conclude that overall, there are

$$(g_1/\varepsilon) \cdot \dots \cdot (g_n/\varepsilon) = \frac{\prod_{i=1}^n g_i}{\varepsilon^n}$$

possible alternatives which are worse than the alternative  $g = (g_1, \dots, g_n)$ . Maximizing this number is equivalent to maximizing the product  $\prod_{i=1}^n g_i$  – which is exactly Nash’s bargaining solution!

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