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14.5 Linear Correlation

We next turn to measures of association between variables that are ordinal or continuous, rather than nominal. Most widely used is the *linear correlation coefficient*. For pairs of quantities $(x_i, y_i),\ i = 1, \dots, N$, the linear correlation coefficient r (also called the product-moment correlation coefficient, or *Pearson's r*) is given by the formula

$$r = \frac{\sum\limits_i (x_i - \overline{x})(y_i - \overline{y})}{\sqrt{\sum\limits_i (x_i - \overline{x})^2}\sqrt{\sum\limits_i (y_i - \overline{y})^2}} \tag{14.5.1}$$

where, as usual, $\overline{x}$ is the mean of the x_i's, $\overline{y}$ is the mean of the y_i's.

The value of r lies between -1 and 1, inclusive. It takes on a value of 1, termed "complete positive correlation," when the data points lie on a perfect straight line with positive slope, with x and y increasing together. The value 1 holds independent of the magnitude of the slope. If the data points lie on a perfect straight line with negative slope, y decreasing as x increases, then r has the value -1; this is called "complete negative correlation." A value of r near zero indicates that the variables x and y are *uncorrelated.*

When a correlation is known to be significant, r is one conventional way of summarizing its strength. In fact, the value of r can be translated into a statement about what residuals (root mean square deviations) are to be expected if the data are fitted to a straight line by the least-squares method (see §15.2, especially equations 15.2.13 – 15.2.14). Unfortunately, r is a rather poor statistic for deciding *whether* an observed correlation is statistically significant, and/or whether one observed correlation is significantly stronger than another. The reason is that r is ignorant of the individual distributions of x and y, so there is no universal way to compute its distribution in the case of the null hypothesis.

About the only general statement that can be made is this: If the null hypothesis is that x and y are uncorrelated, and if the distributions for x and y each have enough convergent moments ("tails" die off sufficiently rapidly), and if N is large (typically > 500), then r is distributed approximately normally, with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of $1/\sqrt{N}$. In that case, the (double-sided) significance of the correlation, that is, the probability that $|r|$ should be larger than its observed value in the null hypothesis, is

$$\text{erfc}\left(\frac{|r|\sqrt{N}}{\sqrt{2}}\right) \tag{14.5.2}$$

where erfc(x) is the complementary error function, equation (6.2.8), computed by the routines `erffc` or `erfcc` of §6.2. A small value of (14.5.2) indicates that the two distributions are significantly correlated. (See expression 14.5.9 below for a more accurate test.)

Most statistics books try to go beyond (14.5.2) and give additional statistical tests that can be made using r. In almost all cases, however, these tests are valid only for a very special class of hypotheses, namely that the distributions of x and y jointly form a *binormal* or *two-dimensional Gaussian* distribution around their mean values, with joint probability density

$$p(x, y)\, dxdy = \text{const.} \times \exp\left[-\frac{1}{2}(a_{11}x^2 - 2a_{12}xy + a_{22}y^2)\right]\, dxdy \qquad (14.5.3)$$

where $a_{11}, a_{12},$ and a_{22} are arbitrary constants. For this distribution r has the value

$$r = -\frac{a_{12}}{\sqrt{a_{11}a_{22}}} \qquad (14.5.4)$$

There are occasions when (14.5.3) may be known to be a good model of the data. There may be other occasions when we are willing to take (14.5.3) as at least a rough and ready guess, since many two-dimensional distributions do resemble a binormal distribution, at least not too far out on their tails. In either situation, we can use (14.5.3) to go beyond (14.5.2) in any of several directions:

First, we can allow for the possibility that the number N of data points is not large. Here, it turns out that the statistic

$$t = r\sqrt{\frac{N-2}{1-r^2}} \qquad (14.5.5)$$

is distributed in the null case (of no correlation) like Student's t-distribution with $\nu = N - 2$ degrees of freedom, whose two-sided significance level is given by $1 - A(t|\nu)$ (equation 6.4.7). As N becomes large, this significance and (14.5.2) become asymptotically the same, so that one never does worse by using (14.5.5), even if the binormal assumption is not well substantiated.

Second, when N is only moderately large (≥ 10), we can compare whether the difference of two significantly nonzero r's, e.g., from different experiments, is itself significant. In other words, we can quantify whether a change in some control variable significantly alters an existing correlation between two other variables. This is done by using *Fisher's z-transformation* to associate each measured r with a corresponding z,

$$z = \frac{1}{2}\ln\left(\frac{1+r}{1-r}\right) \qquad (14.5.6)$$

Then, each z is approximately normally distributed with a mean value

$$\overline{z} = \frac{1}{2}\left[\ln\left(\frac{1+r_{\text{true}}}{1-r_{\text{true}}}\right) + \frac{r_{\text{true}}}{N-1}\right] \qquad (14.5.7)$$

where r_{true} is the actual or population value of the correlation coefficient, and with a standard deviation

$$\sigma(z) \approx \frac{1}{\sqrt{N-3}} \qquad (14.5.8)$$

Equations (14.5.7) and (14.5.8), when they are valid, give several useful statistical tests. For example, the significance level at which a measured value of r differs from some hypothesized value $r_{\rm true}$ is given by

$$\operatorname{erfc}\left(\frac{|z-\overline{z}|\sqrt{N-3}}{\sqrt{2}}\right) \qquad (14.5.9)$$

where z and $\overline{z}$ are given by (14.5.6) and (14.5.7), with small values of (14.5.9) indicating a significant difference. (Setting $\overline{z}=0$ makes expression 14.5.9 a more accurate replacement for expression 14.5.2 above.) Similarly, the significance of a difference between two measured correlation coefficients r_1 and r_2 is

$$\operatorname{erfc}\left(\frac{|z_1-z_2|}{\sqrt{2}\sqrt{\frac{1}{N_1-3}+\frac{1}{N_2-3}}}\right) \qquad (14.5.10)$$

where z_1 and z_2 are obtained from r_1 and r_2 using (14.5.6), and where N_1 and N_2 are, respectively, the number of data points in the measurement of r_1 and r_2.

All of the significances above are two-sided. If you wish to disprove the null hypothesis in favor of a one-sided hypothesis, such as that $r_1 > r_2$ (where the sense of the inequality was decided *a priori*), then (i) if your measured r_1 and r_2 have the *wrong* sense, you have failed to demonstrate your one-sided hypothesis, but (ii) if they have the right ordering, you can multiply the significances given above by 0.5, which makes them more significant.

But keep in mind: These interpretations of the r statistic can be completely meaningless if the joint probability distribution of your variables x and y is too different from a binormal distribution.

```
#include <math.h>
#define TINY 1.0e-20            Will regularize the unusual case of complete correlation.

void pearsn(float x[], float y[], unsigned long n, float *r, float *prob,
    float *z)
```

Given two arrays x[1..n] and y[1..n], this routine computes their correlation coefficient r (returned as r), the significance level at which the null hypothesis of zero correlation is disproved (prob whose small value indicates a significant correlation), and Fisher's z (returned as z), whose value can be used in further statistical tests as described above.

```
{
    float betai(float a, float b, float x);
    float erfcc(float x);
    unsigned long j;
    float yt,xt,t,df;
    float syy=0.0,sxy=0.0,sxx=0.0,ay=0.0,ax=0.0;

    for (j=1;j<=n;j++) {        Find the means.
        ax += x[j];
        ay += y[j];
    }
    ax /= n;
    ay /= n;
    for (j=1;j<=n;j++) {        Compute the correlation coefficient.
        xt=x[j]-ax;
        yt=y[j]-ay;
        sxx += xt*xt;
        syy += yt*yt;
        sxy += xt*yt;
    }
    *r=sxy/(sqrt(sxx*syy)+TINY);
    *z=0.5*log((1.0+(*r)+TINY)/(1.0-(*r)+TINY));      Fisher's z transformation.
    df=n-2;
    t=(*r)*sqrt(df/((1.0-(*r)+TINY)*(1.0+(*r)+TINY)));       Equation (14.5.5).
    *prob=betai(0.5*df,0.5,df/(df+t*t));                     Student's t probability.
/*    *prob=erfcc(fabs((*z)*sqrt(n-1.0))/1.4142136)    */
For large n, this easier computation of prob, using the short routine erfcc, would give approx-
imately the same value.
}
```

CITED REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:

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Korn, G.A., and Korn, T.M. 1968, *Mathematical Handbook for Scientists and Engineers*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill), §19.7.

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14.6 Nonparametric or Rank Correlation

It is precisely the uncertainty in interpreting the significance of the linear correlation coefficient r that leads us to the important concepts of *nonparametric* or *rank correlation*. As before, we are given N pairs of measurements (x_i, y_i). Before, difficulties arose because we did not necessarily know the probability distribution function from which the x_i's or y_i's were drawn.

The key concept of nonparametric correlation is this: If we replace the value of each x_i by the value of its *rank* among all the other x_i's in the sample, that is, $1, 2, 3, \ldots, N$, then the resulting list of numbers will be drawn from a perfectly known distribution function, namely uniformly from the integers between 1 and N, inclusive. Better than uniformly, in fact, since if the x_i's are all distinct, then each integer will occur precisely once. If some of the x_i's have identical values, it is conventional to assign to all these "ties" the mean of the ranks that they would have had if their values had been slightly different. This *midrank* will sometimes be an integer, sometimes a half-integer. In all cases the sum of all assigned ranks will be the same as the sum of the integers from 1 to N, namely $\frac{1}{2}N(N+1)$.

Of course we do exactly the same procedure for the y_i's, replacing each value by its rank among the other y_i's in the sample.

Now we are free to invent statistics for detecting correlation between uniform sets of integers between 1 and N, keeping in mind the possibility of ties in the ranks. There is, of course, some loss of information in replacing the original numbers by ranks. We could construct some rather artificial examples where a correlation could be detected parametrically (e.g., in the linear correlation coefficient r), but could not