Data from our man Zipf

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Vermont Advanced Computing Core | University of Vermont

Outline

George Kingsley Zipf:

In brief:

- Zipf (1902–1950) was a linguist at Harvard, specializing in Chinese languages.
- Unusual passion for statistical analysis of texts.
- Studied human behavior much more generally ...

Zipf's masterwork:

- "Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort" Addison-Wesley, 1949 Cambridge, MA [2]

- Bonus field of study: Glottometrics.
- Bonus 'word' word: Glossolalia.

Human Behavior/Principle of Least Effort:

From the Preface—

Nearly twenty-five years ago it occurred to me that we might gain considerable insight into the mainsprings of human behavior if we viewed it purely as a natural phenomenon like everything else in the universe, ...

And—

... the expressed purpose of this book is to establish The Principle of Least Effort as the primary principle that governs our entire individual and collective behavior ...

The Principle of Least Effort:

Zipf's framing (p. 1):

"... a person in solving his immediate problems will view these against the background of his probable future problems *as estimated by himself*."

"... he will strive ... to minimize the *total work* that he must expend in solving *both* his immediate problems *and* his probable future problems."

"[he will strive to] minimize the *probable average rate of his work-expenditure*..."

Rampaging research

Within Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort:

- City sizes
- # retail stores in cities
- # services (barber shops, beauty parlors, cleaning, ...)
- # people in occupations
- # one-way trips in cars and trucks vs. distance
- # new items by dateline
- weight moved between cities by rail
- # telephone messages between cities
- # people moving vs. distance
- # marriages vs. distance

- Observed general dependency of 'interactions' between cities A and B on $P_A P_B / D_{AB}$ where P_A and P_B are population size and D_{AB} is distance between A and B. $\Rightarrow$ 'Gravity Law.'

Zipfian empirics:

- vocabulary balance: $f \sim r^{-1} \to r \cdot f \sim$ constant (f = frequency, r = rank).

TABLE 2–1

Arbitrary Ranks with Frequencies in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Hanley Index)

I Rank (r)	II Frequency (f)	III Product of I and II ($r \times f = C$)	IV Theoretical Length of Ulysses ($C \times 10$)
10	2,653	26,530	265,500
20	1,311	26,220	262,200
30	926	27,780	277,800
40	717	28,680	286,800
50	556	27,800	278,800
100	265	26,500	265,000
200	133	26,600	266,000
300	84	25,200	252,000
400	62	24,800	248,000
500	50	25,000	250,000
1,000	26	26,000	260,000
2,000	12	24,000	240,000
3,000	8	24,000	240,000
4,000	6	24,000	240,000
5,000	5	25,000	250,000
10,000	2	20,000	200,000
20,000	1	20,000	200,000
29,899	1	29,899	298,990

Zipfian empirics:

- $f \sim r^{-1}$ for word frequency:

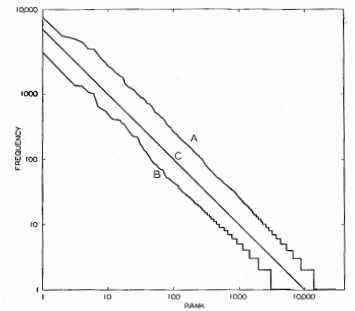


Fig. 2–1. The rank-frequency distribution of words. (A) The James Joyce data; (B) the Eldridge data; (C) ideal curve with slope of negative unity.

Zipf's basic idea:

Forces of Unification and Diversification:

- Easiest for the speaker to use just one word.
  - Encoding is simple but decoding is hard
- Zipf uses the analogy of tools: one tool for all tasks.

- Optimal for listener if all pieces of information correspond to different words (or morphemes).
- Analogy: a specialized tool for every task.
  - Decoding is simple but encoding is hard

- Zipf thereby argues for a tension that should lead to an uneven distribution of word usage.
- No formal theory beyond this... (more later [1])

Zipfian empirics:

- Number of meanings $m_r \propto f_r^{1/2}$ where r is rank and f_r is frequency.

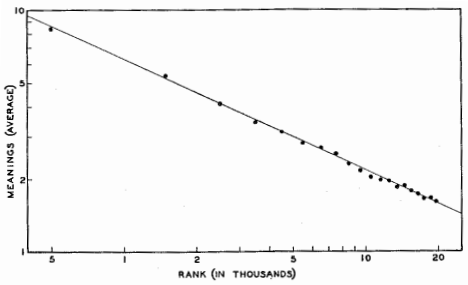


Fig. 2–2. The meaning-frequency distribution of words.

Zipfian empirics:

- Number of employees in organizations

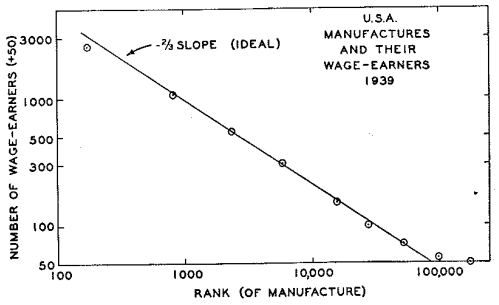


Fig. 9–8. Manufactures and their wage earners in the U. S. A. in 1939, with the manufactures ranked in the order of their decreasing number of wage earners.

- $\alpha = 2/3$ corresponds to $\gamma = 1 + 1/\alpha = 5/2$.

Zipfian empirics:

- Movement of stuff between cities
- D = distance, P_1 and P_2 = city populations.
- Solid line = +1 exponent.

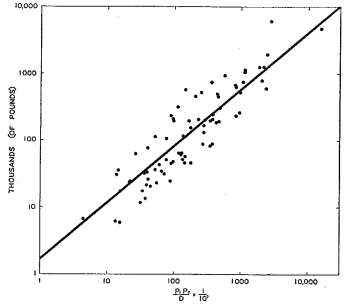


Fig. 9–14. Railway express. The movement by weight (less carload lots) between 13 arbitrary cities in the U. S. A., May 1939.

Zipfian empirics:

- Article length in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

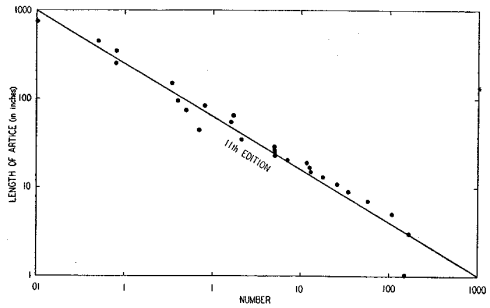


Fig. 5–3. The number of different articles of like length in samples of the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Lengths in inches.

- Not a rank-ordered plot; flipped frequency distribution.
- (?) slope of $-3/5$ corresponds to $\gamma = 5/3$.

Zipfian empirics:

- # news items as a function of population P_2 of location in the Chicago Tribune
- D = distance, P_1 = Chicago's population
- Solid line = +1 exponent.

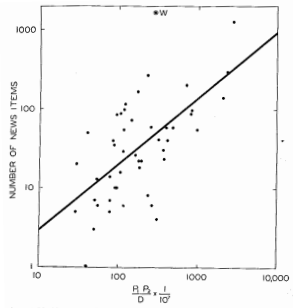


Fig. 9–10. Number of different news items in *The Chicago Tribune* (*W* is the dateline of Washington, D. C.).

Zipfian empirics:

- Length of trip versus frequency of trip.
- Not a rank-ordered plot; flipped frequency distribution. Solid line = -1/2 exponent corresponds to $\gamma = 2$.

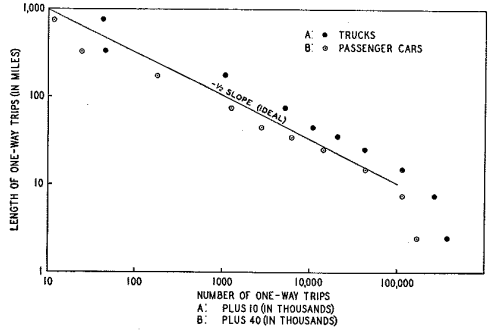


Fig. 9–19. Trucks and passenger cars: the number of one-way trips of like length.

Zipfian empirics:

- Population size of districts:

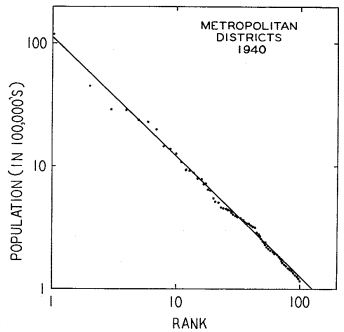


Fig. 9–2. Metropolitan districts. One hundred largest in the U. S. A. in 1940, ranked in the order of decreasing population size.

- $\alpha = 1$ corresponds to $\gamma = 1 + 1/\alpha = 2$.

Zipfian empirics:

- # obituaries in the New York Times for locations with population P_2.
- D = distance, P_1 = New York's population
- Solid line = +1 exponent.

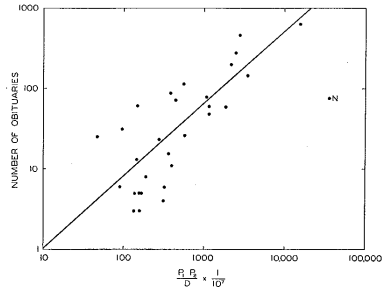


Fig. 9–11. Number of obituaries in *The New York Times* (*N* represents Newark, New Jersey).

Zipfian empirics:

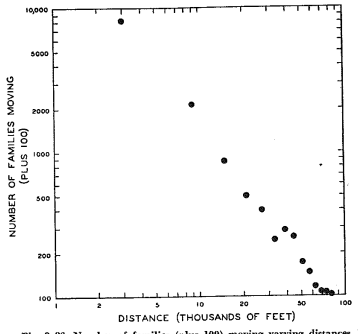


Fig. 9–23. Number of families (plus 100) moving varying distances within or between separated areas in Cleveland during 1933–1935 (adapted from the data of S. A. Stouffer).

Zipfian empirics:

- The probability of marriage?
- $\gamma = 1$?

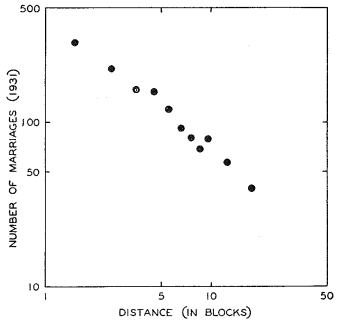
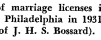


Fig. 9-22. Number of marriage licenses issued to 5,000 pairs of applicants living within Philadelphia in 1931 and separated by varying distances (the data of J. H. S. Bossard).



Comment #60 in Math and the City by Strogatz, NYT:

60. May 20, 2009
9:26 am

Link

George Kingsley Zipf was my teacher at Harvard...He had given a class project where we were to see if Chemical Companies when ranked by the number of different chemicles they produced, followed his Law of Least Effort. I missed turning in my assignment due to the accidental death of my father....When I returned from the funeral I was given a message to call Dr. Zipf immediately. I did and when I explained why I was late turning in the data. He said, "Well, your father's gone and I (Zipf) have no pipeline to God. I expect the data will be on my desk tomorrow morning!".....My mother, sister and extended family spread huge books of trade magazines on the kitchen and dining room tables and furiously went to work....We worked until late in the night and finished the project.....I drove to Harvard the next morning and angrily gave the hundreds of 'three by five cards' to Zipf. All he said was, "Thank you." Years later, I wondered whether his'meaness' had really been his way of helping me and my family to take our minds of our grief that day and concentrate on finishing my assignment. In my youth I thought not, but now as I approach 80, I like to think his seemingly hurtful attitude was really an act of kindness,,,,,

— Jim Terry

Zipfian empirics:

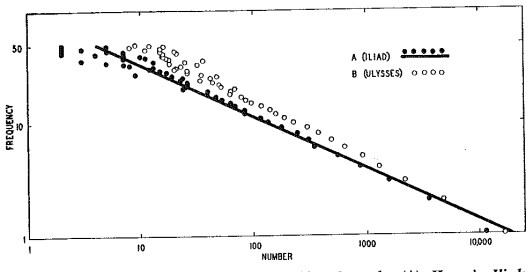


Fig. 2-3. The number-frequency relationship of words. (A) Homer's *Iliad;* (B) James Joyce's *Ulysses.*

Zipfian empirics:

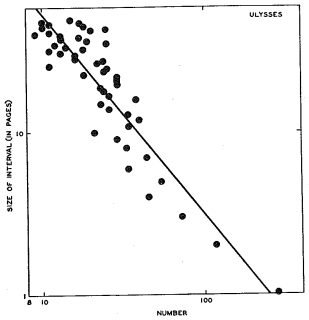


Fig. 2-4. The interval-frequency relationship. The number of different intervals of like size (in pages) between the repetitions of words occurring five times in Joyce's *Ulysses.*

Zipfian empirics:

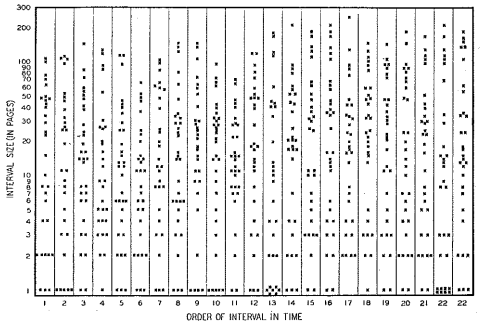


Fig. 2-5. The distribution of intervals between repetitions among the words occurring twenty-four times in James Joyce's *Ulysses.*

Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 2-2

The Number-Frequency Relationship, $N(f^3 - \frac{1}{4}) = C$, of (I) some Arbitrary Lower Frequencies of (II) Joyce's *Ulysses* and (III) four Latin plays of Plautus.

I Frequency (f)	Calculated $N(f^3 - \frac{1}{4})$	
	II Ulysses	III Plautus
1	12,324	4,075
2	15,410	4,490
3	19,193	4,280
4	20,239	4,750
5	22,424	3,985
6	22,773	4,504
7	23,546	4,241
8	23,651	4,399
9	24,063	4,366
10	22,145	4,289
15	21,576	2,922
20	27,844	5,996
30	18,000	3,600
40	25,600	4,800
50	22,500	5,000

Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 2-3

Calculated values of negative slopes, errors, and Y-intercepts of the number, N, of interval-sizes, I_p, between the repetition of words in 14 frequency-classes, f, as fitted to the equation $aX + Y = C$ where $X = \log N$ and $Y = \log I_p$, and where I_p has integral values from 1 through 21 inclusive.

I No. of Analysis	II Frequency of Occur. (f)	III No. of Different Words of like f	IV Slope of Best Line of Y's (negative) ($Y = \log I$)	V Error (root-mean-square)	VI Y-intercept (antilog thereof)
1	5	906	1.21	.151	716
2	6	637	1.20	.169	666
3	10	222	1.27	.106	677
4	12	155	1.24	.111	491
5	15	96	1.15	.096	328
6	16	86	.96	.124	153
7	17	79	1.22	.174	422
8	18	62	1.20	.120	264
9	19	63	1.21	.148	350
10	20	69	1.29	.124	944
11	21	52	1.05	.138	212
12	22	50	1.10	.117	264
13	23	44	1.24	.113	352
14F	24	34	1.01	.158	136
15Z	24	34	1.05	.147	153

Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 2-1

The Frequencies and Average Lengths of Words (A) in terms of the number of phonemes, and (B) in terms of the number of syllables in (A) American newspaper English and in (B) the Latin of Plautus.

(A) AMERICAN NEWSPAPER ENGLISH (According to R. C. Eldridge)						(B) LATIN OF PLAUTUS					
Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Phonemes	Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Phonemes	Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Syllables	Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Syllables
1	2976	(6.656)	31	6		1	5429	(3.33)	31	8	
2	1079	(6.151)	32	4		2	1198	(2.92)	32	3	
3	516	(6.015)	33	6		3	492	(2.77)	33	4	
4	294	(6.081)	34	2		4	299	(2.05)	34	6	
5	212	(5.589)	35	5		5	161	(2.60)	35	3	(2.05)
6	151	(5.768)	36	3		6	126	(2.53)	36	5	
7	103	(5.333)	37	2		7	87	(2.39)	37	7	
8	84	(5.654)	39	2		8	69	(2.44)	38	2	
9	86	(5.174)	40	4		9	54	(2.35)	39	4	
10	45	(5.377)	41	1	(3.903)	10	43	(2.32)	40	3	
11	40	(4.825)	42	7		11	44	(2.29)	41	5	
12	37	(5.459)	43	1		12	36	(2.30)	43	4	
13	25	(5.360)	44	4		13	33	(2.30)	44	1	
14	28	(5.00)	45	1		14	31	(2.09)	45	1	
15	26	(4.807)	46	2		15	13	(2.07)	46	1	
16	17	(5.058)	47	3		16	20	(2.40)	47	3	
17	18	(4.166)	48	1		17	21	(2.09)	48	1	
18	10	(6.100)	49	3		18	21	(2.04)	49	1	(1.70)
19	15	(4.733)	50	3		19	11	(2.18)	50	2	
20	16	(4.687)	51	1		20	15		51	2	
21	13		52	3		21	10		53	4	
22	11		54	1		22	8	(2.08)	54	1	
23	6		55	1	(3.333)	23	8		55	1	
24	8		56	1		24	9		56	2	
25	6		58	2		25	11		58	1	
26	10	(3.455)	60	1		26	7		61	3	
27	9		61–4290	71	(2.666)	27	9		62–514	71	(1.40)
28	6					28	12	(2.00)	33,094	8,437	
29	5					29	4				
30	4					30	4				

Zipfian empirics:

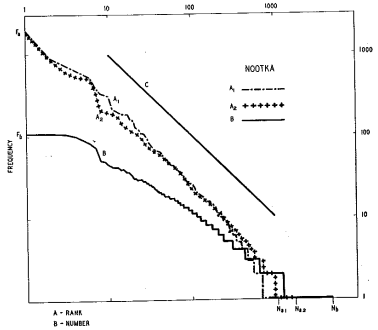


Fig. 3–1. Nootka. The rank-frequency distribution of (A_1) "varimorphs," (A_2) morphemes, and (B) holophrases.

Zipfian empirics:

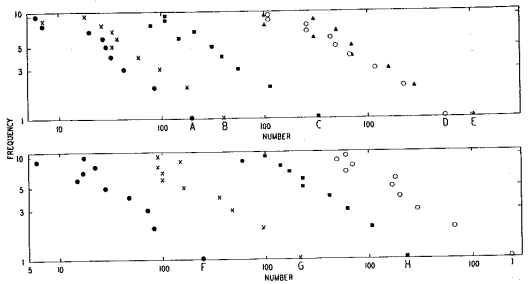


Fig. 3–9. English and German morphemes. The number-frequency distributions of nine different authors.

Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 6–1

The X Number of Different Genera of Like Y Number of Different Species of the Flora of Ceylon (After J. C. Willis).

No. of Genera X	No. of Species Y
573	1
176	2
85	3
49	4
36	5
20	6
etc.	

Zipfian empirics:

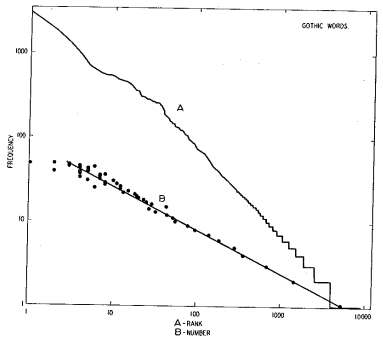


Fig. 3–7. Gothic words. (A) Rank-frequency distribution; (B) number-frequency distribution.

Zipfian empirics:

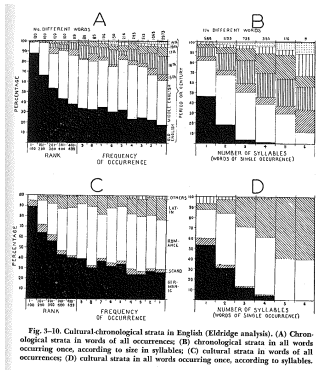


Fig. 3–10. Cultural-chronological strata in English (Eldridge analysis). (A) Chronological strata in words of all occurrences; (B) chronological strata in all words occurring once, according to size in syllables; (C) cultural strata in words of all occurrences; (D) cultural strata in all words occurring once, according to syllables.

Zipfian empirics:

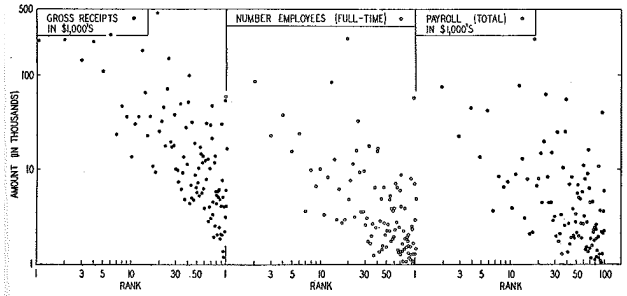


Fig. 9–9. Gross receipts, number of full-time employees, and total payroll of service establishments in the U. S. A. in 1939 when the service establishments are ranked in the order of their decreasing number of members as in Fig. 9–4 *supra*.

Zipfian empirics:

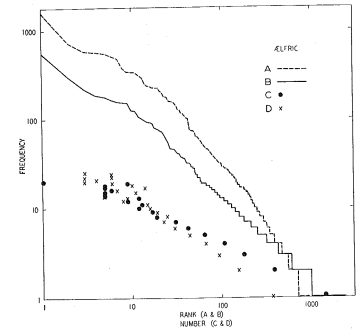


Fig. 3–8. Aelfric's Old English. (A) Rank-frequency distribution of morphemes; (B) rank-frequency distribution of words; (C) number-frequency distribution of morphemes; (D) number-frequency distribution of words.

Zipfian empirics (p. 176):

- Article length in the Encylopedia Brittanica

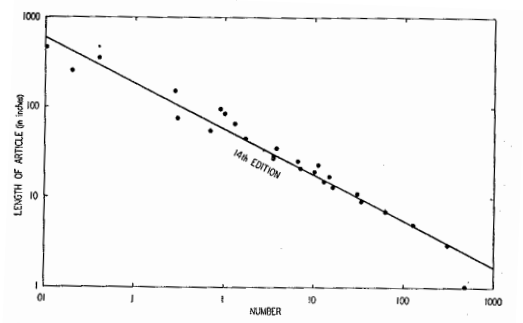


Fig. 5–2. The number of different articles of like length in samples of the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Lengths in inches.

Zipfian empirics:

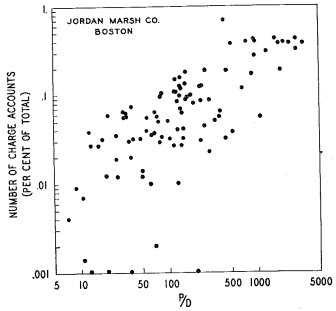


Fig. 9–13. Charge accounts of Jordan Marsh Co., Boston, in 96 cities and towns in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine, with their percentages of total charge accounts plotted against the communities' values of P/D.

Zipfian empirics:

- # species per genera:

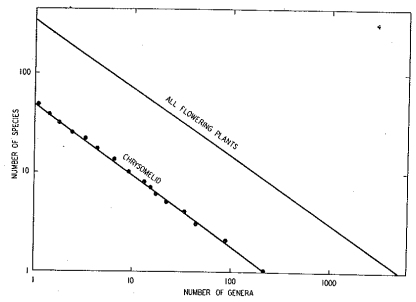


Fig. 6–1. The number of different genera of like number of different species for all flowering plants and for Chrysomelid beetles (from the J. C. Willis data, after reversing the co-ordinates).

- $\alpha = 1$ corresponds to $\gamma = 1 + 1/\alpha = 2$.

References I

[1] R. Ferrer-i-Cancho and R. V. Solé.
Least effort and the origins of scaling in human language.
Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci, 100:788–791, 2003. pdf

[2] G. K. Zipf.
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Addison-Wesley, Cambridge, MA, 1949.

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Data from our man Zipf

Zipf in brief
Zipfian empirics
Yet more Zipfian Empirics
References