

# Data from our man Zipf

Last updated: 2022/08/27, 23:54:10 EDT

Principles of Complex Systems, Vols. 1, 2, & 3D  
CSYS/MATH 300, 303, & 394, 2022-2023 | @pocsvox

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Santa Fe Institute | University of Vermont



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man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

1 of 38

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@pocsvox  
Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

2 of 38

PoCS  
@pocsvox  
Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

3 of 38

# 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:  $f \sim r^{-1} \rightarrow r \cdot f \sim \text{constant}$   
( $f$  = 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 x f = C)	IV Theoretical Length of <i>Ulysses</i> (C x 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	278,000
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

4 of 38

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

5 of 38

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Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

6 of 38

## Zipfian empirics:

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

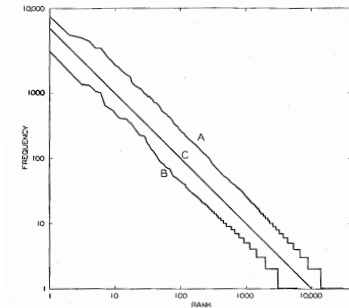


Fig. 2-1. The rank-frequency distribution of words. (A) The James Joyce data; (B) the Eldridge data; (C) ideal curve with slope of negative unity.

7 of 38

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Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

8 of 38

PoCS  
@pocsvox  
Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

9 of 38

## Outline

Zipf in brief

Zipfian empirics

Yet more Zipfian Empirics

References

## 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<sup>[2]</sup>

Bonus field of study: [Glottometrics](#).

Bonus 'word' word: [Glossolalia](#).

3 of 38

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Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

7 of 38

PoCS  
@pocsvox  
Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

8 of 38

PoCS  
@pocsvox  
Data from our  
man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References

9 of 38

## 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<sup>[1]</sup>)

## Zipfian empirics:

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

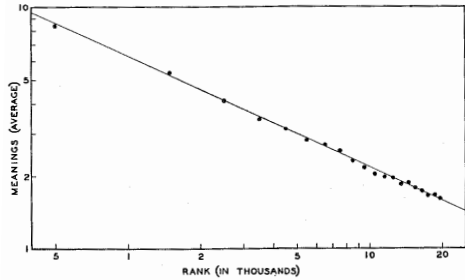


Fig. 2-2. The meaning-frequency distribution of words.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

10 of 38

## Zipfian empirics:

- Article length in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

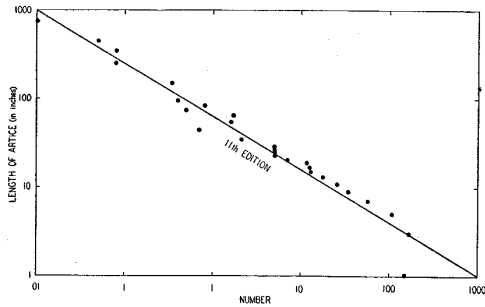


Fig. 5-3. The number of different articles of like length in samples of the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Lengths in inches.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

11 of 38

- Not a rank-ordered plot; flipped frequency distribution.

- (?) slope of  $-3/5$  corresponds to  $\gamma = 5/3$ .

## Zipfian empirics:

- Population size of districts:

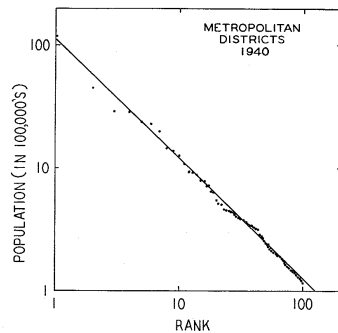


Fig. 9-2. Metropolitan districts. One hundred largest in the U. S. A. in 1940, ranked in the order of decreasing population size.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

12 of 38

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

## Zipfian empirics:

- Number of employees in organizations

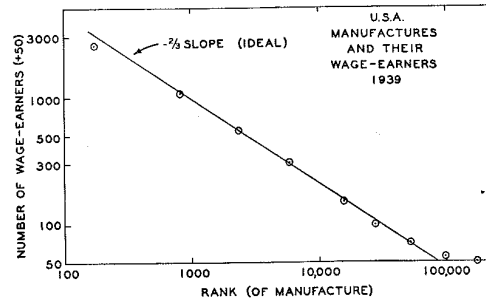


Fig. 9-8. Manufactures and their wage earners in the U. S. A. in 1939, with the manufactures ranked in the order of their decreasing number of wage earners.

10 of 38

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

## 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.

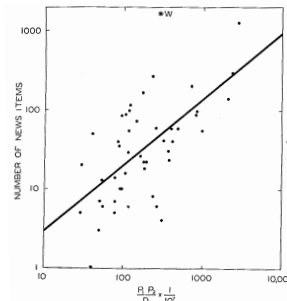


Fig. 9-10. Number of different news items in *The Chicago Tribune* ( $P_2$  is the distance of Washington, D. C.).

11 of 38

## 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.

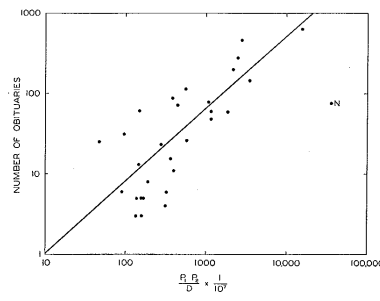


Fig. 9-11. Number of obituaries in *The New York Times* ( $N$  represents Newark, New Jersey).

12 of 38

## Zipfian empirics:

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

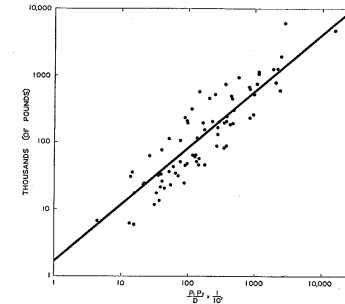


Fig. 9-14. Railway express. The movement by weight (less carload lots) between 13 arbitrary cities in the U. S. A., May 1939.

13 of 38

## Zipfian empirics:

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

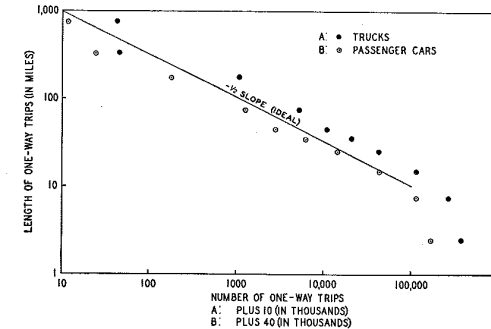


Fig. 9-19. Trucks and passenger cars: the number of one-way trips of like length.

14 of 38

## Zipfian empirics:

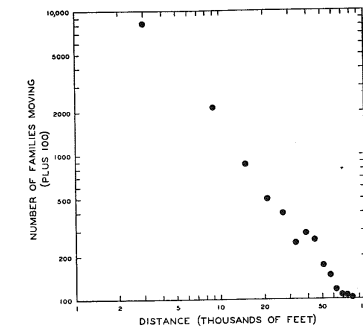


Fig. 9-23. Number of families (plus 100) moving varying distances within or between separated areas in Cleveland during 1933-1935 (adapted from the data of S. A. Stouffer).

15 of 38

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

16 of 38

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

17 of 38

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

18 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

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

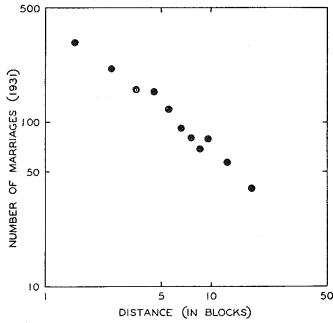


Fig. 9-22. Number of marriage licenses issued to 5,000 pairs of applicants living within Philadelphia in 1991 and separated by varying distances (the data of J. H. S. Bossard).



19 of 38

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References

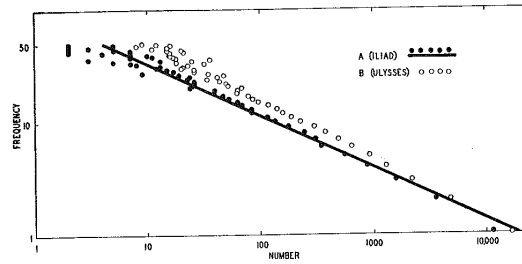


Fig. 2-3. The number-frequency relationship of words. (A) Homer's *Iliad*; (B) James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



22 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 2-4  
The dispersion of single-page intervals between the  $f-1$  repetitions of all words that occur with ten arbitrarily selected frequencies of occurrence,  $f$ , in Joyce's *Ulysses* (Hawley's Index).

A  
The First 12 Intervals between Repetitions

No. of Sample	f	f-1	Intervals between Repetitions in Order of Appearance																			
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12								
1	4	5	62	55	62	58	52	7														
2	12	11	7	19	15	16	9	12	18	16	12	15	14	14								
3	16	15	6	10	13	13	11	16	11	11	9	11	9	11								9
4	17	16	4	3	5	6	4	8	5	10	11	8	14									9
5	18	17	9	11	6	5	6	7	7	6	9	6	2	6								6
6	19	18	3	8	11	5	9	5	13	9	7	3	4	4								7
7	21	20	3	4	10	5	8	9	3	10	8	11	7	7								7
8	22	21	7	5	8	12	5	9	9	7	9	7	3	4								7
9	23	22	3	5	6	4	8	4	3	2	7	3	4	4								4
10	24	23	3	5	2	1	3	3	3	3	4	3	2	3								3

B  
The Intervals from 13 through 23

No. of Sample	f	f-1	Intervals between Repetitions in Order of Appearance																			
			13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23									
3	16	15	6	8	12	8	7	8														
4	17	16	6	6	7	8																
5	18	17	4	6	5	4	4															
6	19	18	2	2	2	1	7	8	4													
7	21	20	6	6	2	2	1	7	8	4												
8	22	21	6	6	6	2	2	7	7	2												
9	23	22	2	2	3	6	2	2	7	2												
10	24	23	2	2	2	3	0	1	2	2												

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



23 of 38

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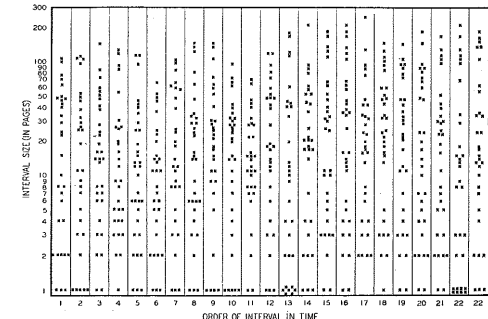


Fig. 2-5. The distribution of intervals between repetitions among the words occurring twenty-four times in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



25 of 38

## 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 chemicals 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 'meanness' had really been his way of helping me and my family to take our minds off 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

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



21 of 38

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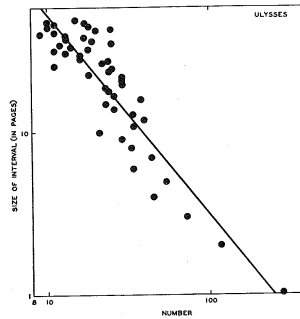


Fig. 2-4. The interval-frequency relationship. The number of different intervals of like size (in pages) between the repetitions of words occurring five times in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



23 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 2-2  
The Number-Frequency Relationship,  $N(f^{-1}) = C$ , of (I) some Arbitrary Lower Frequencies of (II) Joyce's *Ulysses* and (III) four Latin plays of Plautus.

I Frequency (f)	Calculated $N(f^{-1})$	
	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	25,346	4,241
8	25,651	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



21 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 2-3  
Calculated values of negative slopes, errors, and Y-intercepts of the number,  $N$ , of intervals/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 $\log I_p$ (negative)	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
14P	24	34	1.01	.158	136
15Z	24	34	1.05	.147	153

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- Zipf in brief
- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



24 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

TABLE 3-1  
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)

Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Phonemes	Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Phonemes
1	2976	(6.655)	31	6	
2	1079	(6.151)	32	4	
3	516	(6.015)	33	6	
4	284	(6.081)	34	4	
5	212	(5.889)	35	5	
6	151	(5.760)	36	3	
7	105	(5.335)	39	2	
8	88	(5.654)	40	2	
9	85	(5.377)	41	1	(3.903)
10	48	(6.225)	42	1	
11	37	(6.459)	43	1	
12	25	(5.560)	44	1	
14	28	(6.001)	45	1	
15	26	(4.907)	46	2	
16	17	(5.058)	47	2	
17	18	(6.060)	48	1	
18	10	(6.100)	49	3	
19	15	(6.732)	50	3	
20	16	(4.687)	51	2	
21	11		52	3	
22	20		53	1	
23	13		54	1	
24	8		55	1	(3.333)
25	6		56	1	
26	10	(3.455)	58	2	
27	9		59	1	
28	6		60	1	
29	5		61-4290	71	(2.644)
30	4				

(B) LATIN OF PLAUTUS

Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Syllables	Number of Occurrences	Number of Words	Average Number of Syllables
1	5429	(3.23)	31	8	
2	1198	(2.26)	32	3	
3	492	(2.77)	33	5	
4	209	(2.06)	34	6	
5	161	(2.40)	35	5	
6	126	(2.30)	36	3	(2.05)
7	89	(2.44)	39	2	
8	69	(2.45)	40	2	
9	43	(2.33)	40	3	
10	44	(2.28)	41	1	
11	35	(2.50)	43	4	
12	33	(2.30)	44	1	
14	31	(2.09)	46	1	
15	13	(2.07)	46	1	
16	20	(2.40)	47	3	
17	21	(2.09)	48	1	
18	21	(2.04)	49	2	
19	21	(2.16)	50	1	(1.70)
20	15		51	2	
21	10		53	4	
22	11		54	2	
23	8	(2.06)	55	1	
24	7		56	2	
25	11		58	1	
26	7		61	3	
27	9		62-354	71	(1.40)
28	6		33,004	8,437	
29	4				

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- Zipfian empirics
- Yet more Zipfian Empirics
- References



27 of 38

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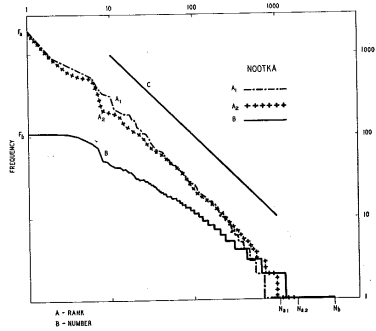


Fig. 3-1. Nootka. The rank-frequency distribution of (A) "varimorphs," (A) morphemes, and (B) holophrases.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

28 of 38

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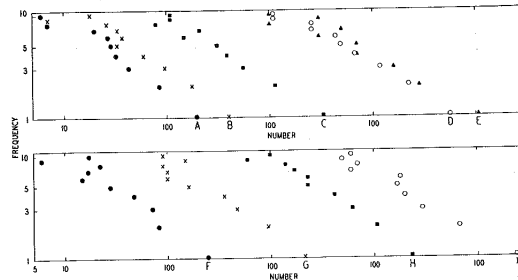


Fig. 3-9. English and German morphemes. The number-frequency distributions of nine different authors.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

29 of 38

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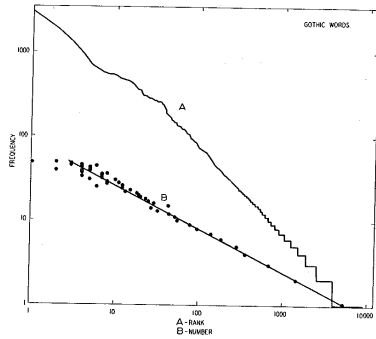


Fig. 3-7. Gothic words. (A) Rank-frequency distribution; (B) number-frequency distribution.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

29 of 38

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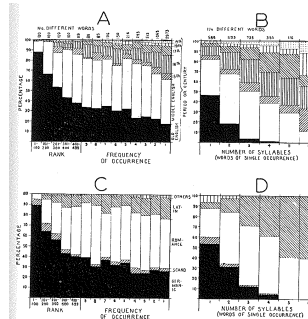


Fig. 4-10. Cultural-chronological strata in English (Eldridge analysis). (A) Chronological strata in words of all occurrences; (B) chronological strata in all words occurring once, according to site in syllables; (C) cultural strata in words of all occurrences; (D) cultural strata in all words occurring once, according to syllables.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

30 of 38

# 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.	

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

31 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

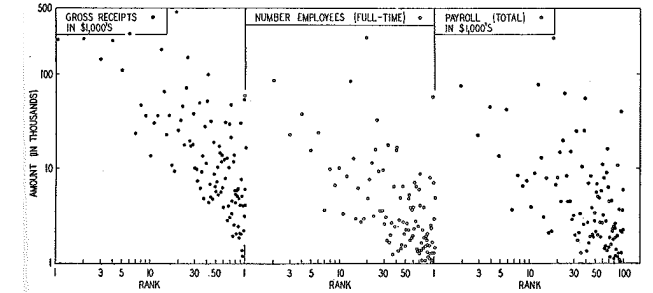


Fig. 9-9. Gross receipts, number of full-time employees, and total payroll of service establishments in the U. S. A. in 1939 when the service establishments are ranked in the order of their decreasing number of members as in Fig. 9-4 supra.

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

32 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

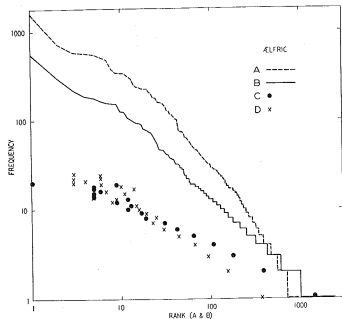


Fig. 3-8. Aelfric's Old English. (A) Rank-frequency distribution of morphemes; (B) rank-frequency distribution of words; (C) number-frequency distribution of morphemes; (D) number-frequency distribution of words.

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Data from our man Zipf

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Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

30 of 38

# Zipfian empirics (p. 176):

## Article length in the Encyclopaedia Britannica

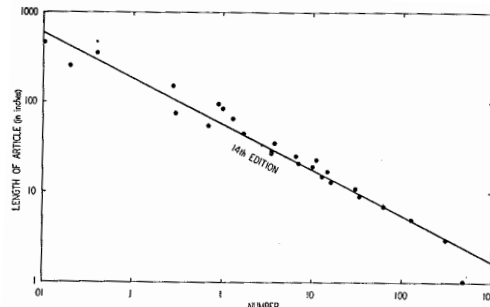


Fig. 5-2. The number of different articles of like length in samples of the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Lengths in inches.

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

33 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

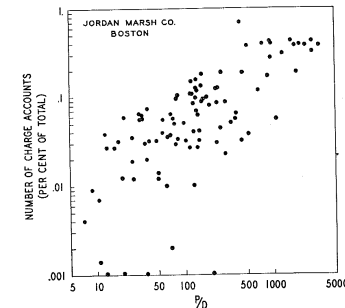


Fig. 9-13. Charge accounts of Jordan Marsh Co. Boston, in 96 cities and towns in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine, with their percentages of total charge accounts plotted against the communities' values of P/D.

33 of 38

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

34 of 38

PoCS  
@pocsvox  
Data from our man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

35 of 38

PoCS  
@pocsvox  
Data from our man Zipf

Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian Empirics  
References

36 of 38

# Zipfian empirics:

# species per genera:

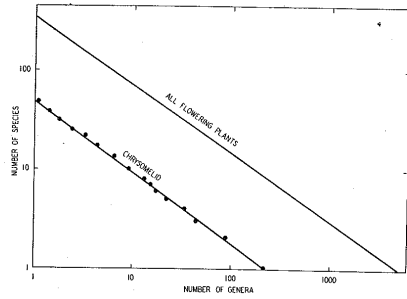


Fig. 6-1. The number of different genera of like number of different species for all flowering plants and for Chrysomelid beetles (from the J. C. Willis data, after reversing the co-ordinates).

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

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References



37 of 38

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Zipf in brief  
Zipfian empirics  
Yet more Zipfian  
Empirics  
References



38 of 38