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R. Harald Baayen

Word Frequency Distributions

Series: Text, Speech and Language Technology

This book is an introduction to the statistical analysis of word frequency distributions, intended for linguists, psycholinguistics, and researchers working in the field of quantitative stylistics and anyone interested in quantitative aspects of lexical structure. Word frequency distributions are characterized by very large numbers of rare words. This property leads to strange statistical phenomena such as mean frequencies that systematically keep changing as the number of observations is increased, relative frequencies that even in large samples are not fully reliable estimators of population probabilities, and model parameters that emerge as functions of the text size. Special statistical techniques for the analysis of distributions with large numbers of rare events can be found in various technical journals. The aim of this book is to make these techniques more accessible for non-specialists. Chapter 1 introduces some basic concepts and notation. Chapter 2 describes non-parametric methods for the analysis of word frequency distributions. The next chapter describes in detail three parametric models, the lognormal model, the Yule-Simon Zipfian model, and the generalized inverse Gauss-Poisson model. Chapter 4 introduces the concept of mixture distributions. Chapter 5 explores the effect of non-randomness in word use on the accuracy of the non-parametric and parametric models, all of which are based on the assumption that words occur independently and randomly in texts. Chapter 6 presents examples of applications.

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