THE POWER METHOD FOR ESTIMATING A STRICTLY DOMINANT EIGENVALUE

1. Select an initial vector $\mathbf{x}_0$ whose largest entry is 1.
2. For $k = 0, 1, \ldots,$
   a. Compute $A\mathbf{x}_k$.
   b. Let μ_k be an entry in $A\mathbf{x}_k$ whose absolute value is as large as possible.
   c. Compute $\mathbf{x}_{k+1} = (1/\mu_k)A\mathbf{x}_k$.
3. For almost all choices of $\mathbf{x}_0$, the sequence $\{\mu_k\}$ approaches the dominant eigenvalue, and the sequence $\{\mathbf{x}_k\}$ approaches a corresponding eigenvector.

EXAMPLE 2 Apply the power method to $A = \begin{bmatrix} 6 & 5 \\ 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}$ with $\mathbf{x}_0 = \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{bmatrix}$. Stop when $k = 5$, and estimate the dominant eigenvalue and a corresponding eigenvector of A.

SOLUTION Calculations in this example and the next were made with MATLAB, which computes with 16-digit accuracy, although we show only a few significant figures here. To begin, compute $A\mathbf{x}_0$ and identify the largest entry μ_0 in $A\mathbf{x}_0$:

$$A\mathbf{x}_0 = \begin{bmatrix} 6 & 5 \\ 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}\begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 5 \\ 2 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \mu_0 = 5$$

Scale $A\mathbf{x}_0$ by $1/\mu_0$ to get $\mathbf{x}_1$, compute $A\mathbf{x}_1$, and identify the largest entry in $A\mathbf{x}_1$:

$$\mathbf{x}_1 = \frac{1}{\mu_0}A\mathbf{x}_0 = \frac{1}{5}\begin{bmatrix} 5 \\ 2 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .4 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$A\mathbf{x}_1 = \begin{bmatrix} 6 & 5 \\ 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .4 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 8 \\ 1.8 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \mu_1 = 8$$

Scale $A\mathbf{x}_1$ by $1/\mu_1$ to get $\mathbf{x}_2$, compute $A\mathbf{x}_2$, and identify the largest entry in $A\mathbf{x}_2$:

$$\mathbf{x}_2 = \frac{1}{\mu_1}A\mathbf{x}_1 = \frac{1}{8}\begin{bmatrix} 8 \\ 1.8 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .225 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$A\mathbf{x}_2 = \begin{bmatrix} 6 & 5 \\ 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .225 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 7.125 \\ 1.450 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \mu_2 = 7.125$$

Scale $A\mathbf{x}_2$ by $1/\mu_2$ to get $\mathbf{x}_3$, and so on. The results of MATLAB calculations for the first five iterations are arranged in Table 2.

TABLE 2 The Power Method for Example 2

k	0	1	2	3	4	5
$\mathbf{x}_k$	$\begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ 1 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .4 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .225 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .2035 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .2005 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .20007 \end{bmatrix}$
$A\mathbf{x}_k$	$\begin{bmatrix} 5 \\ 2 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 8 \\ 1.8 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 7.125 \\ 1.450 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 7.0175 \\ 1.4070 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 7.0025 \\ 1.4010 \end{bmatrix}$	$\begin{bmatrix} 7.00036 \\ 1.40014 \end{bmatrix}$
μ_k	5	8	7.125	7.0175	7.0025	7.00036

The evidence from Table 2 strongly suggests that $\{\mathbf{x}_k\}$ approaches (1, .2) and $\{\mu_k\}$ approaches 7. If so, then (1, .2) is an eigenvector and 7 is the dominant eigenvalue. This is easily verified by computing

$$A\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .2 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 6 & 5 \\ 1 & 2 \end{bmatrix}\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .2 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 7 \\ 1.4 \end{bmatrix} = 7\begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ .2 \end{bmatrix}$$ ■

The sequence $\{\mu_k\}$ in Example 2 converged quickly to $\lambda_1 = 7$ because the second eigenvalue of A was much smaller. (In fact, $\lambda_2 = 1$.) In general, the rate of convergence depends on the ratio $|\lambda_2/\lambda_1|$, because the vector $c_2(\lambda_2/\lambda_1)^k\mathbf{v}_2$ in equation (2) is the main source of error when using a scaled version of $A^k\mathbf{x}$ as an estimate of $c_1\mathbf{v}_1$. (The other fractions λ_j/λ_1 are likely to be smaller.) If $|\lambda_2/\lambda_1|$ is close to 1, then $\{\mu_k\}$ and $\{\mathbf{x}_k\}$ can converge very slowly, and other approximation methods may be preferred.

With the power method, there is a slight chance that the chosen initial vector $\mathbf{x}$ will have no component in the $\mathbf{v}_1$ direction (when $c_1 = 0$). But computer rounding errors during the calculations of the $\mathbf{x}_k$ are likely to create a vector with at least a small component in the direction of $\mathbf{v}_1$. If that occurs, the $\mathbf{x}_k$ will start to converge to a multiple of $\mathbf{v}_1$.