

Information in Local Curvature: Three Papers on Adaptive Methods in Computational Statistics

by

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR
(PhD)



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Preface

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) at the University of Stavanger, Faculty of Science and Technology, Norway. The research has been carried out at the University of Stavanger from September 2017 to August 2020.

The present work is divided in two. The first part gives a brief introduction and background information to the most important topics and ideas of the work. The second part consists of the following papers:

Paper I

Lunde, Berent Ånund Strømnes, Tore Selland Kleppe, and Hans Julius Skaug (2020). Saddlepoint adjusted inversion of characteristic functions. *Journal of Journals* 57, 80-93.

Paper II

Lunde, Berent Ånund Strømnes, Tore Selland Kleppe, and Hans Julius Skaug (2020). An information criterion for automatic gradient tree boosting. *To be submitted for publication in Journal of Journals*.

Paper III

Lunde, Berent Ånund Strømnes, Tore Selland Kleppe, and Hans Julius Skaug (2020). aGTBoost: Adaptive and Automatic Gradient Tree Boosting Computations. *To be submitted for publication in Journal of Journals*.

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Thanks are also due to my co-supervisors, the professors Hans Julius Skaug and Jan Terje Kvaløy. Professor Skaug has co-authored two of the papers in this thesis, allowed a stay at the University of Bergen, and always shared of his time and wide experience, for this I am grateful. Professor Kvaløy has been presence of constant cheerfulness and inspiration. Thank you for always taking a genuine interest in people and their ideas. I extend my thanks to my fellow PhD-students. Utmost appreciation goes out to Kjartan Kloster Osmundsen and Birthe Aarekol, for the many discussions and several trips all around the world to academic conferences and meetings.

Finally, I want to give many thanks to my friends, in particular Kjetil for his unlimited accommodating spirit. And also my family, in particular my mother, Katrin, for invaluable advice, and my wife, Saeron Min, which has been a force of continued support. You have let me dive into hours of silent thoughts, calculations and coding when it was needed, but have also pulled me away and forced upon me a more balanced life when I would encounter a runtime error of the mind, but of the kind which I would not be able to see or solve by myself.

Berent Ånund Strømnes Lunde
Stavanger, August 2020

Abstract

Advanced statistical computations have become increasingly important, as with the increased flexibility of models capturing complex relationships in new data and use-cases, comes increased difficulties of fitting procedures for the models. For example if the model is complex, involving multiple sources of randomness, then the probability density function used in maximum likelihood estimation typically does not have a closed form. On the other hand, in regression type problems the closed form of the conditional distribution of the response is often known. However, the relationship between features and response can be complex, high dimensional and is generally unknown, motivating non-parametric procedures with new sets of fitting problems.

This thesis explores techniques utilizing the local curvature of objective functions, and using the information inherent in this local curvature, to create more stable and automatic fitting procedures. In the first paper, a saddlepoint adjusted inverse Fourier transform is proposed. The method performs arbitrarily accurate numerical inversion, even in the tails of the distribution. This allow practitioners to specify their models in terms of the characteristic function which often exists in closed form. The second paper proposes an information criterion for the node-splits, after greedy binary splitting, in gradient boosted trees. This removes the need for computationally expensive cross validation and expert opinions in tuning hyperparameters associated gradient tree boosting. The third paper focuses on the implementation of the theory presented in the second paper into the R-package aGTBoost, and also builds on the information criterion to suggest an adjustment of ordinary greedy-binary-splitting, adapted to gradient tree boosting.

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1 Introduction

Advanced statistical methods and procedures have seen increased and widespread usage in later years. This is backed by access to more data and new use-cases, cheaper computational power, and adaption into mainstream languages such as Python and R. Underlying this trend is also the increased usability of said algorithms, in regards to training on data and putting them into production. The goal of this thesis is to further the usability of computational methods in statistics with regards to stability, speed, and automatic functionality.

The main approach of the present work is to, in some loose and wide sense, approximate some objective function with a local quadratic approximation to either solve stability issues, create dynamic step-lengths, or measure the uncertainty of estimators. The hope is then that the iterative methods that the local quadratic approximation is applied to, will see an increased adaptivity to individual data and problems, and corresponding decrease in manual tuning performed before applications to the problem at hand.

The first part of this thesis will give a brief and informal introduction to the concepts and techniques that are used in papers I-III. The basis is the objective of maximum likelihood and supervised learning, which are presented in the first section. The second section introduces the local quadratic approximation, and showcase it in the relevant use-cases for papers I-III, i.e. maximum-likelihood numerical optimization, the saddlepoint approximation, gradient tree boosting, and asymptotic theory. The final section summarises the papers of the thesis.

2 Maximum likelihood and supervised learning

Maximum likelihood estimation and supervised learning are briefly introduced in an informal manner. This is done to provide intuition to the fundamental objectives of the algorithms that are presented, and as motivation to the research on the algorithms's problems presented in this thesis.

2.1 Maximum likelihood estimation

Let \mathbf{x} denote an n -dimensional vector of observations from a parametric distribution, with density denoted $p(\mathbf{x}; \theta_0)$, where $\theta_0 \in \Theta$, $\Theta \subseteq \mathbb{R}^p$ is a p -dimensional vector. Is often the case that a reasonable parametric family of functions, $p(\mathbf{x}; \theta)$, $\theta \in \Theta$, can be inferred from the problem and from inspection of the data. However, θ_0 will be unknown, and it is reasonable to estimate it using the observed data \mathbf{x} . To this end, maximum likelihood estimation is a popular approach. The maximum likelihood estimate (MLE) is the value of θ in Θ which maximizes the probability of the data, i.e. the likelihood,

$$\hat{\theta} = \arg \min_{\theta} \{-\log p(\mathbf{x}; \theta)\}. \quad (2.1)$$

The maximum likelihood estimate, $\hat{\theta}$ is, under suitable regularity conditions, the asymptotically unbiased minimum variance estimate, and asymptotically normal. See -Van der vaart- for a treatment of their asymptotic properties.

2.2 Supervised learning

The supervised learning objective is perhaps easiest stated as "regression", but also bears resemblance to maximum likelihood estimation. Assume now that $\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times m}$ is a matrix of p covariates or features for n observations. Let $y \in \mathbb{R}^n$ be an n -vector of response observations.

In general, individual response observations, y_i , $i = 1 \dots n$, could also be multidimensional, but throughout this thesis they are assumed one-dimensional. Let \hat{y}_i be a prediction for y_i and let the loss function $l(y_i, \hat{y}_i)$ be a function measuring the difference between a response and its prediction. The supervised learning objective is to find the best possible predictive function, $f(x) = \hat{y}$, which takes a feature vector (row-vector of \mathbf{x}) as its argument, and outputs a prediction \hat{y} . "Best possible" is here in reference to the loss l over observations not part of the training data (\mathbf{x}, y) . More formally, we seek f so that

$$\hat{f} = \arg \min_f \{E [l(y^0, f(x^0))]\}, \quad (2.2)$$

where the superscript (y^0, x^0) indicates an observation unseen in the training data, and E denotes the expectation. Notice that, if the search is constrained over a parametric family of functions indexed by $\theta \in \Theta$, and the loss function is taken to be the negative log-likelihood, $l = -\log p$, then the supervised learning objective corresponds to maximum likelihood estimation in a regression setting.

3 Quadratic approximations in statistics

The maximum likelihood objective 1 and supervised learning objective 2 are, except for the most trivial of cases, not straightforward, and must be solved numerically. This then typically involve some iterative algorithm, which may require substantial manual tuning and trial and error before successful application. However, a local quadratic approximations to some otherwise intractable function can often be of help in making these algorithms more automatic and adaptive to the data and problem at hand.

When referring to a local quadratic approximation, it meant to refer to a 2'nd order Taylor approximation, about some point x_0 . For example, the quadratic approximation of the negative log-likelihood loss function about some value of θ , say θ_k , gives

$$l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta)) \approx l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta_k)) + \nabla_{\theta} l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta_k))(\theta - \theta_k) + \frac{1}{2}(\theta - \theta_k)^T \nabla_{\theta}^2 l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta_k))(\theta - \theta_k). \quad (3.1)$$

Example 3.0.1 (Newton-Raphson) *The MLE $\hat{\theta}$ in 1 typically has to be found numerically, as the score equations, $0 = \nabla_{\theta} l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta_k))$, is not possible to solve analytically. Assuming that l is differentiable and convex in θ , the Newton-Raphson algorithm will converge to the MLE $\hat{\theta}$. It is constructed by employing the r.h.s. of 3.1. iteratively to the current value of θ , say θ_k , the next value in the iterative algorithm is constructed by*

$$\theta_{k+1} = \theta_k - [\nabla_{\theta}^2 l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta_k))]^{-1} \nabla_{\theta} l(y_i, f(x_i; \theta_k)),$$

the MLE if l indeed was equal to the quadratic approximation on the r.h.s. in 3.1.

while Fisher-scoring (or, in general, natural gradients) is perhaps preferable due to stability reasons than the NR algorithm, NR and FS is equivalent when the distribution is in the exponential family and canonical parametrization. Which is an important family of functions, implicitly considered in paper II and III.

The following sections discuss applications of local quadratic approximations to attempted solutions to some of the problems following from numerical optimization of 1 and 2.

3.1 *The saddlepoint approximation*

3.2 *Gradient tree boosting*

3.3 *First order asymptotics*

4 Summary of the papers

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Appendix

Paper I

Saddlepoint adjusted inversion of characteristic functions

The First Paper

Ole Olesen¹, Geir Geirsen¹, and Jens Jensen²

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January 6, 2020

Abstract

Lorem Ipsum is simply dummy text of the printing and typesetting industry. Lorem Ipsum has been the industry's standard dummy text ever since the 1500s, when an unknown printer took a galley of type and scrambled it to make a type specimen book. It has survived not only five centuries, but also the leap into electronic typesetting, remaining essentially unchanged. It was popularised in the 1960s with the release of Letraset sheets containing Lorem Ipsum passages, and more recently with desktop publishing software like Aldus PageMaker including versions of Lorem Ipsum

1 Introduction

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Paper II

An information criterion for automatic gradient tree boosting

The Second Paper

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Paper III

aGTBoost: Adaptive and Automatic Gradient Tree Boosting Computations

The Third Paper

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