

When is a network complex? Connectance as a driver of degree distribution

T. Poisot

Introduction

- complexity in networks
- degree distribution vs. connectance
- “physical” argument

Statistical argument

Assuming an ecological network made of n species, and assuming undirected interactions with no self-edges (*e.g.* no cannibalism), there can be at most $M = n(n - 1)/2$ interactions in this network, in which case it is a complete graph (the results presented below hold for both directed graphs, and graphs in which self-edges are allowed). This maximal number of links, M_n , represent the whole space of possible links. With this information in hand, it is possible to know the total number of possible networks given a number l of interactions.

If we term S_n the set of all possible M_n edges in a n -node network, then the number $G_{n,l}$ of possible networks with l links is the number of l -combinations of S_n , meaning that $G_{n,l} = C_l^{M_n}$, (where C_x^y is the binomial coefficient, *i.e.* the number of possible ways to pick x elements among y) or

$$G_{n,l} = \frac{M_n!}{l!(M_n - l)!}$$

Note that this number of possible networks include some graphs in which nodes have a degree of 0, and that in most ecological studies, such nodes will be discarded. In addition, in a null-model context [1,2], having unconnected nodes in random replicates will change the richness of the community, thus possibly biasing the value of randomized emerging properties. Finding out the number of graphs in which some nodes have a degree of 0 is similar to finding out how many networks exist with l links between $n - 1$ nodes. If one node is removed from the network, there are C_{n-1}^n possible combinations of nodes (this simplifies

to n). For each of these, there are $G_{n-1,l}$ possible networks configurations. Note that these networks will also include situations in which *more* than one species has a degree of 0, so that evaluating $G_{n-2,l}$ and so forth is not necessary. Calling $R_{n,l}$ the number of networks with n nodes and l edges in which all nodes have at least one edge attached, we can write

$$R_{n,l} = G_{n,l} - C_{n-1}^n \times G_{n-1,l}$$

We call the quantities R and G , respectively, the *realized* and *total* network space. They tell how many networks of n nodes and l edges exists. Based on these informations, we can make two predictions.

Prediction 1: Because $C_x^y = C_{y-x}^y$, it comes that the total network space is largest when $l = M_n/2$. As in this context the maximal number of edges is M_n , we define connectance as l/M_n , so $\max(G_{n,l})$ is reached at $Co = 1/2$.

$R_{n,l}$ and $G_{n,l}$ will be maximized when l is close to $M_n/2$. In other words, the maximal number of possible networks occurs when connectance is intermediate.

Prediction 2: $R_{n,l}$ will become asimptotically closer to $G_{n,l}$ when l is close to M_n . In other words, there is only one way to fill a network of n nodes with M_n interactions, and in this situation there is no possibility to have nodes with a degree of 0.

We now illustrate these predictions using networks of 10 nodes, with a number of edges varying from 10 to M_{10} (*i.e.* 45 edges).

- probability to generate a suitable network

Simulations

In the previous part, we show mathematically that connectance (the number of realized *vs.* possible interaction), relative to the network size, determined the size of the *network sapce*, *i.e.* how many possible network combinations exist. Based on this, we can therefore predict that the degree distribution will be contingent upon network connectance. Specifically, we expect that the variance of the degree distribution, which is often used [3], will display a hump-shaped relationship with connectance. The mean, kurtosis, and skewness of the degree distribution should all vary in a monotonous way with connectance.

In the simulations below, we use a network of 25 nodes, filled with 30 to M_{25} interactions.

- unipartites
- explain the procedure
- give results for average, variance, kurtosis, skewness

Practical consequences

- null models
- swap

1 Bascompte, J. *et al.* (2003) The nested assembly of plant–animal mutualistic networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 100, 9383–9387

2 Fortuna, M.A. and Bascompte, J. *et al.* (2006) Habitat loss and the structure of plant-animal mutualistic networks. *Ecology Letters* 9, 281–286

3 Fortuna, M.A. *et al.* (2010) Nestedness versus modularity in ecological networks: two sides of the same coin? *Journal of Animal Ecology* 78, 811–817