Memorylessness of the Exponential Distribution

In (Figure) recall that the amount of time between customers is exponentially distributed with a mean of two minutes ($X \sim Exp(0.5)$). Suppose that five minutes have elapsed since the last customer arrived. Since an unusually long amount of time has now elapsed, it would seem to be more likely for a customer to arrive within the next minute. With the exponential distribution, this is not the case–the additional time spent waiting for the next customer does not depend on how much time has already elapsed since the last customer. This is referred to as the **memoryless property**. Specifically, the **memoryless property** says that

$P(X > r + t \mid X > r) = P(X > t)$ for all $r \geq 0$ and $t \geq 0$

For example, if five minutes have elapsed since the last customer arrived, then the probability that more than one minute will elapse before the next customer arrives is computed by using $r = 5$ and $t = 1$ in the foregoing equation.

$P(X > 5 + 1 \mid X > 5) = P(X > 1) = e^{(-0.5)(1)} = \approx 0.6065$.

This is the same probability as that of waiting more than one minute for a customer to arrive after the previous arrival.

The exponential distribution is often used to model the longevity of an electrical or mechanical device. In (Figure), the lifetime of a certain computer part has the exponential distribution with a mean of ten years ($X \sim Exp(0.1)$). The **memoryless property** says that knowledge of what has occurred in the past has no effect on future probabilities. In this case it means that an old part is not any more likely to break down at any particular time than a brand new part. In other words, the part stays as good as new until it suddenly breaks. For example, if the part has already lasted ten years, then the probability that it lasts another seven years is $P(X > 17 \mid X > 10) = P(X > 7) = 0.4966$.