AM205: More on the condition number

Many numerical operations that we consider can essentially be boiled down to

$$y = f(x), \tag{1}$$

where x is a collection of some input values, y is a collection of some output values, and f is a function encapsulating the details of the operation. For any system such as this, an important numerical feature of interest is to know how a small change in the input from x to $x + \Delta x$ will affect the output. Mathematically, the change Δy to y is defined by

$$y + \Delta y = f(x + \Delta x). \tag{2}$$

Ideally, one would like that a small change in the input Δx would create only a small change in the output Δy, so that the numerical procedure is not sensitive to the initial conditions, and small errors in input will not create large variations in output. This can be mathematically characterized via the *condition number*, defined as

$$\kappa = \frac{|\Delta y / y|}{|\Delta x / x|}, \tag{3}$$

where the input and output are normalized so that x and y are dimensionless. Equation 3 is a rather loose, general definition and needs to be further specified depending on the situation. If x and y are vectors, then the $|\cdot|$ operators must be interpreted as some type of norm. In addition, κ will depend on the specific choices of x and Δx. Usually, the maximum bound on κ over the range of permissible values is reported.

The condition number for function evaluation

Suppose that x and y in Eq. 1 are scalars, and f is a real, differentiable function. Then by making use of Eq. 1 and 2,

$$\frac{\Delta y}{y} = \frac{f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)}{f(x)} = \frac{f(x + \Delta x) - f(x)}{\Delta x} \frac{\Delta x}{f(x)}. \tag{4}$$

Hence, if Δx is small,

$$\frac{\Delta y}{y} \approx \frac{f'(x) \Delta x}{f(x)}. \tag{5}$$

An approximate value of the condition number is therefore

$$\kappa \approx \left| \frac{f'(x) x}{f(x)} \right|. \tag{6}$$

As expected, the condition number is higher in places where f varies rapidly and f' is large, so that small changes in x will result in large changes in y.

The condition number for solving a matrix equation

Suppose that we now consider the condition number for the matrix equation

$$Ax = b, \tag{7}$$

where A is an invertible matrix, x is a solution vector, and b is a vector of source terms. Hence $A(x + \Delta x) = b + \Delta b$ and by linearity $A\Delta x = \Delta b$, so the condition number is given by

$$\kappa = \frac{||\Delta b||/||b||}{||\Delta x||/||x||} = \frac{||A\Delta x||}{||\Delta x||} \frac{||x||}{||Ax||} \tag{8}$$

where $||\cdot||$ represents a vector norm, such as the Euclidean norm. To proceed, a matrix norm can be defined in terms of the vector norm as

$$||A|| = \max_{v \neq 0} \frac{||Av||}{||v||} \tag{9}$$

representing the maximum ratio that the matrix can scale a vector's length by. Then

$$\kappa \leq ||A|| \frac{||x||}{||Ax||}. \tag{10}$$

By rewriting $x = A^{-1}b$, this becomes

$$\kappa \leq ||A|| \frac{||A^{-1}||}{||b||} \leq ||A|| \, ||A^{-1}||, \tag{11}$$

and hence the upper bound on the condition number is the product of the matrix norm and the inverse matrix norm.