

Yelp Restaurant Reviews : Sentiment Analysis for the Prediction of Star Ratings

Kuan Siew Weng

11 November 2015

1. Introduction

The explosive growth and influence of social media, blogs and online review sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, TripAdvisor, has stirred up much interest in businesses to mine and quantify user opinions and sentiments expressed in tweets, posts and user reviews.

For restaurants in particular, sentiments expressed on such review sites may have a significant impact on their customer volume and revenues.

The aim of this study is to investigate the predictive accuracy of applying sentiment analysis and machine learning methods on Yelp restaurant reviews to predict the 5-star ratings of each review from user sentiments extracted from the review text.

Due to the complex nature of natural language processing and sentiment analysis, the study is confined to review texts written in the English language only, to keep the scope of the project manageable.

2. Methods and Data

Data

The data used for this study is the academic dataset provided by the Yelp Dataset Challenge Round 6 website, which included 1.6 million reviews by 366 thousand users for 61 thousand businesses.

As the focus of this study is on restaurant reviews, I have taken a 10% random sample of the provided review dataset, and did an inner join of the sample review dataset to the business dataset by **business_id**, and selected reviews that are categorized as “Restaurants” only. The resulting cleaned dataset for analysis comprised of 98841 reviews for 15464 restaurants.

Methods and Tools

In this study, I used a methodology, which comprised of the following steps:

1. Explore the cleaned reviews dataset, looking for language patterns in both negative and positive reviews, according to the 5-star ratings.
2. Select a sentiment polarity model and customize for the restaurant review context.
3. Select and extract additional features from the text such as total sentence count, total word count, positive words count, negative words count.
4. Define and refine the stars prediction model (response and predictor variables)
5. Experiment with various classification methods (RandomForest, Naive-Bayes, SVM, Multinomial Regression, Gradient Boosted Machines, ..etc)
6. Repeat steps 1 to 5 iteratively until training model cross-validation results are optimal.
7. Select three classification methods and predict using the test dataset
8. Compare and tabulate the accuracy results of the three methods.

At the end, the selected sentiment polarity model is the model offered by the [qdap](#) R package by Tyler Rinker, and the three selected classification methods were RandomForest (rf), Naive-Bayes (nb), and Penalized Multinomial Regression (multinom) which would be trained and tested using the [caret](#) R package.

go there again start by saying
 after waiting minutes
 came our table let them know our drink orders
 worst experience ever if would like about minutes later
 bad customer service never come back took our drink
 few minutes later said she would not going
 not very goodgot up left not go back poor customer service
 she told me asked if wanted worst service ever minutes get our
 when got there never going back food came out would never go
 don't know how don't know what when finally got
 not sure what will not go go somewhere else but will never
 took forever get when got home not sure how do not eat
 she did not will not return over an hour coming back here
 didn't even get will never return will not back she said she
 only good thing asked if could by far worst food all
 finally got out did not like
 not coming back no one came
 food good but don't waste time
 when our food go there again not sure if
 never go back not do not go
 minutes no one
 all can eat if could give took our order will never eat
 money waste time money would not recommend wont going back
 not worth money
 do yourself favor our drink order not going back an hour get
 let me start will not be returning don't know if not have that
 took minutes get asked speak manager got our food not eat here
 will never come did not get eat here again not go here
 do not recommend don't come here
 come our table not recommend place don't go back
 not even close an hour half good thing about
 thing about place many many many
 not come here very long time
 terrible customer service

love love place prices very reasonable
great food service definitely going back
will not be disappointed never been disappointed
great service great definitely come back
will go back service great food worth every penny
oxtail soup oxtail
has always been mac n cheese there so many
our first time food came out food great service service top notch
all can say dont know how food so good
did not disappoint great food great next time vegas
just right amount but well worth
wait go back least once week
check place out go back again best mexican food
cant wait come dont know what
cant wait come much better than
back next time let me tell
been coming here
will definitely back also very good
cant go wrong first time here
come back again soup oxtail soup
more than enough go back try
come back here by far best
staff super friendly will definitely come
lunch or dinner
hands down best sweet potato fries
every time go love love love definitely go back
would highly recommend never bad meal love place great
very reasonably priced highly recommend place
definitely coming back one favorite places
great customer service do yourself favor
would definitely recommend
but not too

Figure 1: A Comparison of 1-Star and 5-Star Reviews Trigram Word Clouds

Exploratory Data Analysis

Using the **NLP** and **qdap** packages, I explored the review text field in search of the most commonly occurring unigrams, bigrams and trigrams in the 1-star and 5-stars rated reviews to understand the language used by restaurant patrons in the most negatively and positively rated reviews.

Negative reviews frequently contain n-grams such as “horrible experience”, “terrible service”, “mediocre food” as well as warnings such as “don’t waste money”, “go somewhere else”, “never be back”, whereas positive reviews frequently contain n-grams such as “great food”, “great service” and also on repeat visits such as “can’t wait to be back”, “go back again”, “cant go wrong”, ... etc. This is illustrated in the Figure 1, which is a comparison of the Trigram Word Clouds generated for 1-Star and 5-Stars Reviews.

Exploration of the review sample data showed that nearly 2 out of 3 restaurant reviews are rated 4 or 5 stars. This suggests that there is a strong bias of reviewers to post positive reviews rather than negative reviews.

Another observation is that most reviews are less than 100 words long although a few reviews even exceeded 400 words. However, the length of the reviews does not appear to be correlated to their star ratings.

These initial observations are summarized in the figure 2.

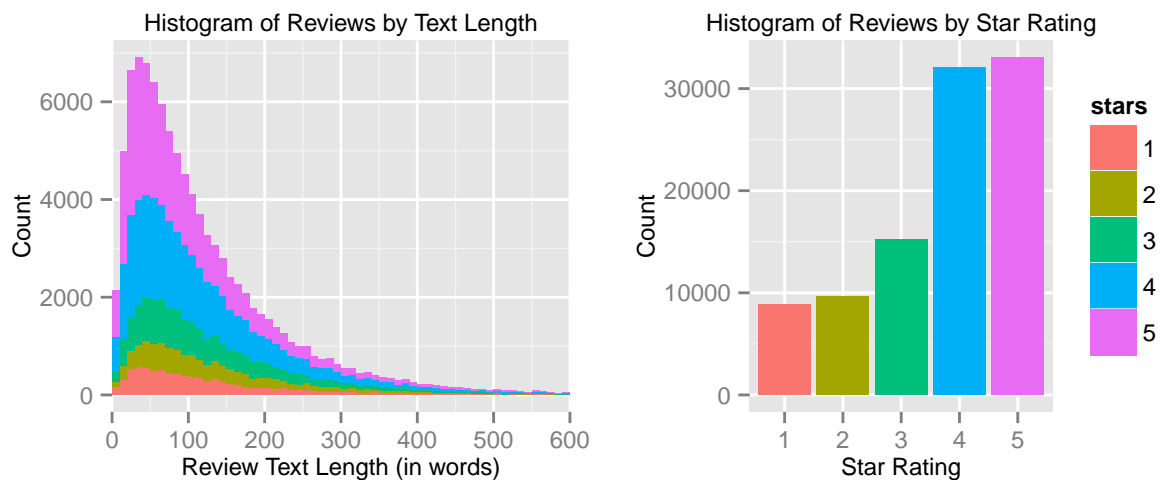


Figure 2: Histogram Plots of Reviews by Word Count and Star Ratings

Sentiment Polarity Analysis

The **qdap** package provides a function called **polarity**, which can be used to analyze and quantify the sentiment of a text, and returns a sentiment polarity score between -1 (for most negative sentiments) and 1 (for most positive sentiments).

The **polarity** function is dependent on the polarity dictionary used, which it defaults to the word polarity dictionary used by [Hu & Liu \(2004\)](#).

The initial Review Sentiment Polarity Model (Model 1) used the default polarity dictionary, and the review text was analyzed as a whole. The results revealed that overly positive scores were assigned to many of the negative reviews. The variances of the polarity scores for reviews with the same star rating were quite high as well.

To enable the **polarity** function to consider the type of language used by the reviewers, I created a restaurant-reviews context dictionary that extends the default dictionary with positive and negative n-grams occurring often in reviews, such as “never be back”, “can’t wait to be back”, and also tune the model by adjusting the weightages. The following is an example output of the **polarity** function.

```
polarity(sent_detect("This is worst place ever. Crap Food. Horrible service."),
  polarity.frame = REVIEWS_DICT, constrain=T)
## all total.sentences total.words ave.polarity sd.polarity stan.mean.polarity
## 1 all 3 9 -0.83 0.101 -8.225
```

For the final Review Sentiment Polarity Model (Model 2), this custom polarity dictionary was used, and the polarity of each sentence of the review text was analyzed, and their average value was taken as the review’s sentiment polarity score.

The distribution of sentiment polarity scores by star ratings of the two models is shown in the two box plots of Figure 3.

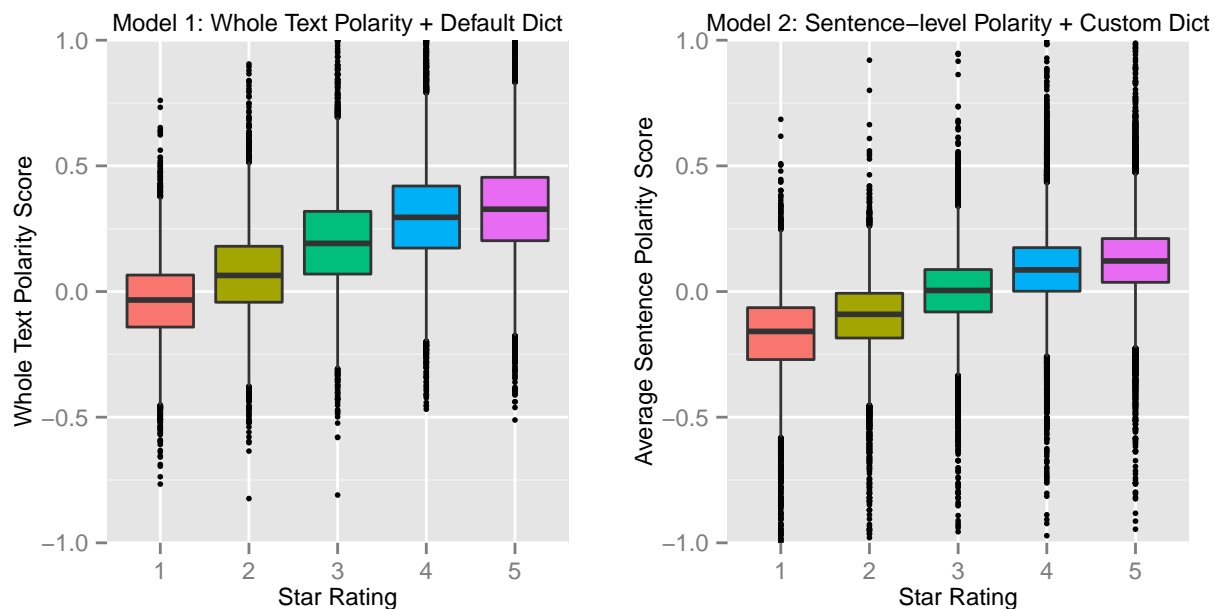


Figure 3: Polarity Box Plots by Star Ratings

These plots show that by using a context-specific custom dictionary and analyzing polarity at the sentence level, the review polarity values for Model 2 were not positively skewed like Model 1; and the variance of the Model 2 polarity scores within each star rating were narrowed as well, though outliers are still present.

Star Ratings Prediction Modeling

The polarity-analyzed restaurant review datasets were partitioned (70% for training and 30% for testing); and I fitted the prediction model with different combination of features on the training dataset using the candidate classification methods with 3-fold cross-validation.

After several iterations of feature selection, the final review sentiment model selected is based on sentence-level polarity, and the final review stars prediction model formula contains the following predictor variables:

- average polarity score returned by the **polarity()** function
- total sentence count, total word count, positive word count, negative word count.

Based on the best training accuracy results and also taking training time into consideration, Random Forest, Naive-Bayes and Penalized Multinomial Regression were the three methods selected for final prediction testing on the unseen testing dataset.

3. Results

Model testing for all three methods returned consistent accuracy results to those achieved during training, suggesting that overfitting may not be a concern. The accuracy attained during testing for each of these methods are summarized in the following set of tables:

Table 1: Final Model - RandomForest Prediction Accuracy By Class

	Class: 1	Class: 2	Class: 3	Class: 4	Class: 5
Pos Pred Value	0.4086	0.2507	0.2123	0.3751	0.4551
Sensitivity	0.4279	0.1783	0.1171	0.3822	0.5743
Specificity	0.9391	0.9420	0.9204	0.6950	0.6555

Table 2: Final Model - Naive-Bayes Prediction Accuracy By Class

	Class: 1	Class: 2	Class: 3	Class: 4	Class: 5
Pos Pred Value	0.3833	0.2736	0.2186	0.3731	0.4528
Sensitivity	0.3892	0.2303	0.1414	0.3589	0.5630
Specificity	0.9385	0.9335	0.9074	0.7112	0.6592

Table 3: Final Model - Multinomial Prediction Accuracy By Class

	Class: 1	Class: 2	Class: 3	Class: 4	Class: 5
Pos Pred Value	0.4144	0.3049	0.2359	0.3525	0.4871
Sensitivity	0.5438	0.0886	0.0425	0.4228	0.6388
Specificity	0.9245	0.9780	0.9748	0.6280	0.6631

Table 4: Final Model - Overall Accuracy by Prediction Method

	RandomForest	NaiveBayes	Multinomial
Accuracy	0.3893	0.3834	0.4141

The results showed that the overall accuracy attained for all three methods are rather low, with the highest being 41%, by the Penalized Multinomial Regression method

However, the prediction sensitivity for star ratings 2 and 3 are low for all three methods, implying that at these levels, reviews were mostly misclassified; even though accuracy was better for other ratings.

4. Discussion

The Complexity of User Review Language

These results of this simple study show how complex natural language processing is, and how difficult it is for an algorithm to gauge the user sentiment accurately from an informal English text alone.

Interestingly, it seems much harder to predict sentiment polarity correctly for negative reviews as compared to positive reviews. There may be a number of possible reasons for this:

1. Star ratings given by reviewers is subjective and vary depending on a reviewer's personal disposition, cultural bias and context. Therefore, different reviewers may give different ratings for similar sentiments expressed. One man's 4-stars is another man's 5-stars.
2. Reviewers may be positive with some aspects of his experience, e.g food, but very negative on others, e.g. the attitude of waiters
3. Lowly-rated reviews often contain as many as positive words as negative words, when reviewers expressed unmet expectations in positive terms, e.g. "Planned a happy celebration; but ..."
4. The use of localized slang and swear words in reviews, e.g. "The food is da bomb !!", where a normally negative word "bomb" is used to express positive sentiment. Our dictionary is not sufficiently populated with such slang words.
5. The use of sarcastic language, especially in lowly-rated reviews, was not detected by our simple review sentiment model.
6. Spelling mistakes, e.g. "Graet food!!", were missed by our model.

It is therefore not surprising that the accuracy is so low, and it would not be very useful to predict the 5-star rating of the review from its text using these methods.

The Alternative Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down Rating System

In this final subsection, I would like to explore an alternative to the 5-star rating system. In 2010, Youtube replaced their 5-star rating system with a Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down rating system, touting it as a simpler and less ambiguous way for viewers to express their sentiment for a video.

With over 60% of Yelp restaurant reviews in our sample positively rated at 4 or 5 stars, it would be reasonable to infer that reviewers who rated a restaurant at 3 stars or less, to have some negative sentiment. Thus, we can reasonably consider 4-5 stars as a "Thumbs-Up" and 1-3 stars as a "Thumbs-Down" for a restaurant review under the Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down rating system.

If we apply this heuristic mapping to our reviews sample, and train our models to predict the Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down rating instead of the 5-star rating, we indeed find that the prediction accuracy measures attained for all methods to be much higher and more useful as a result. The results are summarized in the table 5 below.

Table 5: Thumbs-Up/Thumbs-Down Model - Prediction Accuracy

Method	Overall.Accuracy	Pos.Pred.Value	Sensitivity	Specificity
RandomForest	0.7643	0.7894	0.8750	0.5517
NaiveBayes	0.7391	0.7978	0.8080	0.6069
Multinomial	0.7691	0.7851	0.8934	0.5306

To re-run the analysis and reproduce this report, the R Markdown source for this paper can be viewed and downloaded from my Github Repo: [DSS_Capstone Github Repo](#).