

Probabilistic decisions

Tomáš Svoboda, Matěj Hoffmann, and Petr Pošík
thanks to, Daniel Novák and Filip Železný

Vision for Robots and Autonomous Systems, Center for Machine Perception
Department of Cybernetics
Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Czech Technical University in Prague

April 24, 2025

(Re-)introduction uncertainty/probability

- ▶ Markov Decision Processes (MDP)/RL – uncertainty about outcome of **actions**
 - ▶ *Sequential* decisions (robot/agent goes from s_0 to s_G)
 - ▶ $\pi : \mathcal{S} \rightarrow \mathcal{A}$
 - ▶ **Policy (Strategy):** knowing what to do for all possible states.
- ▶ Now: uncertainty associated with **states**
 - ▶ Different states may have different **prior probabilities**.
 - ▶ The states $s \in \mathcal{S}$ are not directly observable.
 - ▶ They need to be inferred from **features (observations, measurements)** $x \in \mathcal{X}$.
 - ▶ *Single (repeated)* decision $\delta : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{D}$ ($\delta : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{S}$ if $\mathcal{D} = \mathcal{S}$);
 - ▶ **(Decision) Strategy:** knowing how to decide for all possible measurements.
- ▶ Decision example, crossing street:
 - ▶ x = camera image; $\mathcal{X}$ is the space of all possible images
 - ▶ $\mathcal{S} = \{\text{car, bus, bicycle, truck}\}$ approaching
 - ▶ I decide to: $\mathcal{D} = \{\text{go, wait}\}$

2 / 24

Notes

Just a reminder: MDPs, value iteration and policy iteration methods. In RL: temporal difference learning. Now, strictly speaking, we are interested in single decision. Due to its stochastic nature, we understand that anything can happen and we are seeking optimality in a statistical sense - what is the outcome of the decision when repeated.

$\mathcal{S}$ and $\mathcal{D}$ are often the same as we will see later. Yet, it is convenient to keep it separate. States represent the ground-truth, and Decision is the output of the algorithm.

Decision example: Insure or not? (from late 1980s) [5]

"Insurance company does not want to insure a married couple."

Known: HIV test falsely positive only in 1 case out of 1000 tests of healthy people.

A doctor calls: "Your HIV test is positive, you will die almost certainly (999/1000) in 10 years. I'm sorry ...".

- Was the doctor right?
- Was the insurance company rational?

$\mathcal{S} = \{\text{healthy}, \text{infected}\}$, $\mathcal{X} = \{\text{positive_test}, \text{negative_test}\}$, $\mathcal{D} = \{\text{insure}, \text{reject}\}$

What is the probability the man is infected?

- A: $\frac{1}{1000}$
- B: $\frac{999}{1000}$
- C: Don't know yet, more info needed, but less than $\frac{1}{2}$
- D: Don't know yet, more info needed, but more than $\frac{1}{2}$

3 / 24

Notes

Equations/formulas are simple but not easy to (fully) understand.

- Doctor: $P(\text{positive test} \mid \text{healthy}) = \frac{1}{1000}$ but this is the *likelihood* which we learn before the patient's diagnosis (classification).
- More interesting and important is to know:
 $P(\text{healthy} \mid \text{positive test})$ (*posterior*).
- Think about 10000 samples of heterosexual males, family, Statistically, there is just 1 HIV positive among them.
- Assume $P(\text{negative test} \mid \text{infected}) \rightarrow 0$. (false negative rate)
- 1 person HIV positive will be tested positive, but also 10 other healthy persons will be tested positive. Hence $P(\text{healthy} \mid \text{positive test}) = 10/11$.
- Or, for the doctor: $P(\text{infected} \mid \text{positive test}) = \frac{1}{11}$ and not $\frac{999}{1000}$.
- The fact that a disease is rare matters a lot!

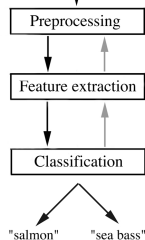
		Symptoms (test)	
		Positive	Negative
State	healthy	$\frac{1}{1000}$	
	ill infected	$\frac{999}{1000}$? no!	

Think about 10000 samples (individuals). Among whole male heterosexuals, HIV is a rare disease.

		Symptoms (test)	
		Positive	Negative
State	healthy	$\frac{10}{10000}$	9989
	ill infected	1	0

$$P(\text{ill} \mid \text{pos}) = \frac{1}{11}$$

Classification example: What's the fish?



- ▶ Factory for fish processing
- ▶ 2 **classes** $s_{1,2}$:
 - ▶ salmon
 - ▶ sea bass
- ▶ **Features** $\vec{x}$: length, width, lightness etc. from a camera

Notes

- Sea (European) bass, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_bass. (In Czech it is Mořčák evropský or Mořský vlk.)
- Salmon, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salmon>. (losos in Czech)

Fish – classification using probability

$$posterior = \frac{likelihood \times prior}{evidence}$$

- ▶ Notation for classification problem
 - ▶ Classes $s_j \in \mathcal{S}$ (e.g., salmon, sea bass)
 - ▶ Features $x_i \in \mathcal{X}$ or feature vectors ($\vec{x}_i$) (also called attributes)
- ▶ Optimal classification of $\vec{x}$:

$$\delta^*(\vec{x}) = \arg \max_j P(s_j | \vec{x})$$

- ▶ We thus choose the **most probable class for a given feature vector** .
- ▶ Both likelihood and prior are taken into account – recall Bayes rule:

$$P(s_j | \vec{x}) = \frac{P(\vec{x} | s_j) P(s_j)}{P(\vec{x})}$$

- ▶ Can we do (classify) better?

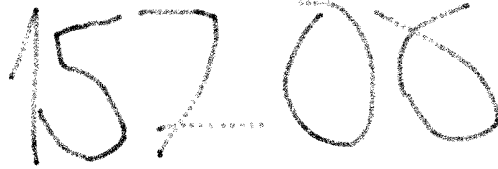
5 / 24

Notes

Assuming we know the true $P(\vec{x} | s_j), P(s_j), P(\vec{x})$ we *cannot* do better! Bayesian classification is optimal!

Decision making under uncertainty

- ▶ An important feature of intelligent systems
 - ▶ make the best possible decision
 - ▶ in uncertain conditions
- ▶ **Example:** Take a tram OR subway from *A* to *B*?
 - ▶ Tram: timetables imply a quicker route, but adherence uncertain.
 - ▶ Subway: longer route, but adherence almost certain.
- ▶ **Example:** where to route a letter with this ZIP?

A handwritten ZIP code '15700' in black ink. The '1' is a simple vertical stroke. The '5' is a vertical stroke with a horizontal bar. The '7' is a vertical stroke with a diagonal bar. The '0' is a simple oval. The second '0' is a simple oval.

- ▶ 15700? 15706? 15200? 15206?
- ▶ What is the **optimal decision** ?
- ▶ What is the **cost** of the decision? What is the associated **loss** ?
- ▶ What is the relation between **loss** and **utility** ?

6 / 24

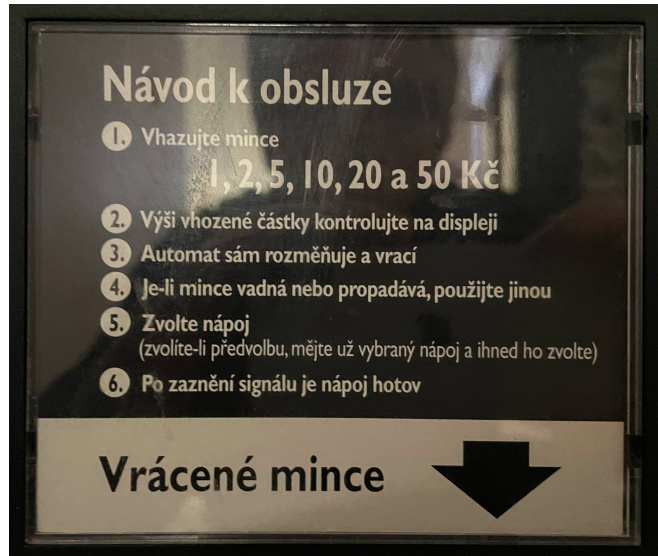
Notes

There are *costs* associated with a decision. E.g. at fish packing plant, customers may not mind so much if some pieces of salmon end up in sea bass cans, but they will be protesting if the opposite happens. So making an error "one way" has higher cost than "the other way". This impacts where decision boundaries for classification should optimally be drawn.

The decision **loss** can be seen as counterpart of the **utility**. We want either maximize utility or minimize loss. In machine learning and pattern recognition community, the term loss is used much more frequently.

Remember that quality of a policy is evaluated as the expected sum of (discounted) rewards. Quality of the decision strategy will be evaluated based on the expected loss - we will call it risk of the strategy.

Introducing decision loss: Coin recognition



Notes

Recognizing/classifying coins: components

- ▶ $s \in \{1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50\}$ – state - the true value
- ▶ $x \in \{0.0, 0.1, \dots, 9.9\}[g]$ – measurement, observation
- ▶ $P(s, x)$ joint probability
- ▶ $d \in \{1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50\}$ – decision, result of the algorithm

How many strategies?:

- A 100
- B 100^6
- C 600
- D 6^{100}

What is the best strategy?



Loss function $\ell(?)$

is a function of:

A s

B s, d

C s, x, d

D d

Strategy $d = \delta(?)$

is a function of:

A x

B s

C s, x

Notes

$P(s, x)$ think about an Oracle for the moment, we will discuss it more later

We assume 100 possible measurements $x \in \{0.0, 0.1, \dots, 9.9\}$

Introducing decision loss: What to cook for dinner [4]

- ▶ Wife is coming back from work. Husband: what to cook for dinner?
- ▶ 3 dishes (**decisions**) in his repertoire:
 - ▶ *nothing* ... **don't bother cooking** $\Rightarrow$ no work but makes wife upset
 - ▶ *pizza* ... **microwave a frozen pizza** $\Rightarrow$ not much work but won't impress
 - ▶ *g.T.c.* ... **general Tso's chicken** $\Rightarrow$ will make her day, but very laborious
- ▶ "Hassle" (cost) incurred by the individual options depends on wife's mood (**state**).
- ▶ For each of the 9 possible situations (3 possible decisions $\times$ 3 possible states), the cost is quantified by a **loss function** $\ell(d, s)$:

$\ell(s, d)$	$d = \textit{nothing}$	$d = \textit{pizza}$	$d = \textit{g.T.c.}$
$s = \textit{good}$	0	2	4
$s = \textit{average}$	5	3	5
$s = \textit{bad}$	10	9	6

The wife's state of mind is an **uncertain state**.

Notes

Was the state known, the decision would be simple.

Example (cont'd), State uncertain, get some measurements, ...

- ▶ Husband's experiment. He tells her he accidentally overtoped their wedding video and observes her reaction.
- ▶ Anticipates 4 possible reactions:
 - ▶ *mild* ... all right, we keep our memories.
 - ▶ *irritated* ... how many times do I have to tell you....
 - ▶ *upset* ... Why did I marry this guy?
 - ▶ *alarming* ... silence
- ▶ The reaction is a measurable **attribute/symptom** ("**feature**") of the mind state.
- ▶ From experience, the husband knows how probable individual reactions are in each state of mind; this is captured by the **joint distribution $P(x, s)$** .

$P(x, s)$	$x = mild$	$x = irritated$	$x = upset$	$x = alarming$
$s = good$	0.35	0.28	0.07	0.00
$s = average$	0.04	0.10	0.04	0.02
$s = bad$	0.00	0.02	0.05	0.03

10 / 24

Notes

Joint distribution. Husband tried similar experiment multiple times, gathered some evidence ...

Instead of complicated experiment with overtoping the wedding video, think about asking "when are you coming home?" .

Decision strategy and its risk

- ▶ **Decision strategy** : a rule selecting a decision for *any given value* of the measured attribute(s). $\delta : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{D}$.
- ▶ i.e. function $d = \delta(x)$.
- ▶ Example of husband's possible strategies:

$\delta(x)$	$x = \text{mild}$	$x = \text{irritated}$	$x = \text{upset}$	$x = \text{alarming}$
$\delta_1(x) =$	<i>nothing</i>	<i>nothing</i>	<i>pizza</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>
$\delta_2(x) =$	<i>nothing</i>	<i>pizza</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>
$\delta_3(x) =$	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>
$\delta_4(x) =$	<i>nothing</i>	<i>nothing</i>	<i>nothing</i>	<i>nothing</i>

- ▶ How many strategies?
- ▶ How to define which strategy is the best? How to sort them by quality?
- ▶ Define the **risk of a strategy** as a **mean (expected) loss value**.

$$r(\delta) = \sum_x \sum_s \ell(s, \delta(x)) P(x, s)$$

11 / 24

Notes

Overall, $3^4 = 81$ possible strategies (3 possible decisions for each of the 4 possible attribute values). There is some analogy of states and possible actions. Here, we reason about states - which are 3 (state of mind) - from features which are 4.

Any given value (of measured attribute) ... Think about any possible state.

Recall MDPs and RL.

- Reward (or penalty) was associated with state or state transition when executing an action $R(s, a, s')$. Similarly here, loss, $\ell(s, \delta(x))$, is associated with state and decision/action.
- Difference: policy / decision strategy.
 - MDP/RL: policy $\pi(s)$
 - Now: state s not directly observable anymore. Instead, policy / decision strategy, $\delta(x)$, needs to be defined over their *percepts/symptoms/attributes*, x .
 - s and x need to be linked via $P(x, s)$.

Calculating $r(\delta) = \sum_x \sum_s \ell(s, \delta(x))P(x, s)$

$\ell(s, d)$	$d = \textit{nothing}$	$d = \textit{pizza}$	$d = \textit{g.T.c.}$
$s = \textit{good}$	0	2	4
$s = \textit{average}$	5	3	5
$s = \textit{bad}$	10	9	6

$P(x, s)$	$x = \textit{mild}$	$x = \textit{irritated}$	$x = \textit{upset}$	$x = \textit{alarming}$
$s = \textit{good}$	0.35	0.28	0.07	0.00
$s = \textit{average}$	0.04	0.10	0.04	0.02
$s = \textit{bad}$	0.00	0.02	0.05	0.03

$\delta(x)$	$x = \textit{mild}$	$x = \textit{irritated}$	$x = \textit{upset}$	$x = \textit{alarming}$
$\delta_1(x) =$	<i>nothing</i>	<i>nothing</i>	<i>pizza</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>
$\delta_2(x) =$	<i>nothing</i>	<i>pizza</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>
$\delta_3(x) =$	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>	<i>g.T.c.</i>
$\vdots$	$\vdots$	$\vdots$	$\vdots$	$\vdots$

Do we need to evaluate all possible strategies? $P(x, s) = P(s|x)P(x)$

Notes

- Risk depends on strategy (decisions).
- Strategy (decisions) depends on observation.
- Loss combines decision and state.
- The total weighted average is weighted by joint probability of observation and state.

Calculate $r(\delta_1)$ and $r(\delta_2)$, which strategy is better?

Bayes optimal strategy

- ▶ The **Bayes optimal strategy** : one minimizing mean risk.

$$\delta^* = \arg \min_{\delta} r(\delta)$$

- ▶ From $P(x, s) = P(s|x)P(x)$ (Bayes rule), we have

$$\begin{aligned} r(\delta) &= \sum_x \sum_s \ell(s, \delta(x)) P(x, s) = \sum_s \sum_x \ell(s, \delta(x)) P(s|x) P(x) \\ &= \sum_x P(x) \underbrace{\sum_s \ell(s, \delta(x)) P(s|x)}_{\text{Conditional risk}} \end{aligned}$$

- ▶ The optimal strategy is obtained by minimizing the conditional risk *separately* for each x :

$$\delta^*(x) = \arg \min_d \sum_s \ell(s, d) P(s|x)$$

Optimal strategy: $\delta^*(x) = \arg \min_d \sum_s \ell(s, d)P(s|x)$

$\ell(s, d)$	$d = \text{nothing}$	$d = \text{pizza}$	$d = \text{g.T.c.}$
$s = \text{good}$	0	2	4
$s = \text{average}$	5	3	5
$s = \text{bad}$	10	9	6

$P(x, s)$	$x = \text{mild}$	$x = \text{irritated}$	$x = \text{upset}$	$x = \text{alarming}$
$s = \text{good}$	0.35	0.28	0.07	0.00
$s = \text{average}$	0.04	0.10	0.04	0.02
$s = \text{bad}$	0.00	0.02	0.05	0.03

$\delta(x)$	$x = \text{mild}$	$x = \text{irritated}$	$x = \text{upset}$	$x = \text{alarming}$
$\delta^*(x) =$	??	??	??	??

Notes

We need to recompute the table of joint probability $P(s, x)$ into table of conditional probabilities $P(s|x)$. This can be done in two ways. A: Using product rule, $P(s|x) = P(s, x)/P(x)$.

First, to get $P(x)$, we use Sum rule (marginalizing).

$P(x)$	$x = \text{mild}$	$x = \text{irritated}$	$x = \text{upset}$	$x = \text{alarming}$
	0.39	0.40	0.16	0.05

Second, applying product rule, $P(s|x) = P(s, x)/P(x)$.
B: calculating the probability on a “per column basis”.
E.g. for the first cell, A: $0.35/0.39 = 0.897$ B: $0.35/(0.35 + 0.04)$

$P(s x)$	$x = \text{mild}$	$x = \text{irritated}$	$x = \text{upset}$	$x = \text{alarming}$
$s = \text{good}$	0.897	0.7	0.438	0.00
$s = \text{average}$	0.103	0.25	0.25	0.4
$s = \text{bad}$	0.00	0.125	0.313	0.6

Having the table of all $P(s|x)$ we just mechanically insert into the equation in the slide title.

Statistical decision making: wrapping up

► Given:

- A set of possible **states** : $\mathcal{S}$
- A set of possible **decisions** : $\mathcal{D}$
- A **loss function** $\ell : \mathcal{D} \times \mathcal{S} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$
- The range $\mathcal{X}$ of the **attribute**
- Distribution $P(x, s)$, $x \in \mathcal{X}, s \in \mathcal{S}$.

► Define:

- **Strategy** : function $\delta : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{D}$
- **Risk of strategy** $\delta : r(\delta) = \sum_x \sum_s \ell(s, \delta(x)) P(x, s)$

► Bayes problem:

- Goal: find the optimal strategy $\delta^* = \arg \min_{\delta} r(\delta)$
- Solution: $\delta^*(x) = \arg \min_d \sum_s \ell(s, d) P(s|x)$ (for each x)

A special case - Bayesian *classification*

- ▶ Bayesian classification is a special case of statistical decision theory:

- ▶ Attribute vector $\vec{x} = (x_1, x_2, \dots)$: pixels 1, 2, $\dots$

- ▶ **State set $\mathcal{S}$ = decision set $\mathcal{D} = \{0, 1, \dots, 9\}$.**

- ▶ **State = actual class, Decision = recognized class**

- ▶ Loss function:

$$\ell(s, d) = \begin{cases} 0, & d = s \\ 1, & d \neq s \end{cases}$$

$$\delta^*(\vec{x}) = \arg \min_d \sum_s \underbrace{\ell(s, d)}_{0 \text{ if } d=s} P(s|\vec{x}) = \arg \min_d \sum_{s \neq d} P(s|\vec{x})$$

Obviously $\sum_s P(s|\vec{x}) = 1$, then:

$$P(d|\vec{x}) + \sum_{s \neq d} P(s|\vec{x}) = 1$$

Inserting into above:

$$\delta^*(\vec{x}) = \arg \min_d [1 - P(d|\vec{x})] = \arg \max_d P(d|\vec{x})$$

16 / 24

Notes

- Classification as opposed to Decision
- Loss function simply counts errors (misclassifications)
- We consider all errors equally painful!
- More examples during the lab $\dots$
- The final result is not that surprising, is it? (Is it good or bad?)

References I

Further reading: Chapter 13 and 14 of [7] (Chapters 12 and 13 in [8]). Books [2] (for this lecture, read Chapter 1) and [3] are classical textbooks in the field of pattern recognition and machine learning. Interesting insights into how people think and interact with probabilities are presented in [5] (in Czech as [6]).

[1] People vs. Collins.

<https://law.justia.com/cases/california/supreme-court/2d/68/319.html>.

[2] Christopher M. Bishop.

Pattern Recognition and Machine Learning.

Springer Science+Business Media, New York, NY, 2006.

<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/uploads/prod/2006/01/Bishop-Pattern-Recognition-and-Machine-Learning-2006.pdf>.

References II

- [3] Richard O. Duda, Peter E. Hart, and David G. Stork.
Pattern Classification.
John Wiley & Sons, 2nd edition, 2001.
- [4] Zdeněk Kotecký, Petr Vysoký, and Zdeněk Zdráhal.
Kybernetika.
SNTL, 1990.
- [5] Leonard Mlodinow.
The Drunkard's Walk. How Randomness Rules Our Lives.
Vintage Books, 2008.
- [6] Leonard Mlodinow.
Život je jen náhoda. Jak náhoda ovlivňuje naše životy.
Slovart, 2009.

References III

- [7] Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig.
Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach.
Prentice Hall, 3rd edition, 2010.
<http://aima.cs.berkeley.edu/>.
- [8] Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig.
Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach.
Prentice Hall, 4th edition, 2021.
<http://aima.cs.berkeley.edu/>.

Additional material for thinking

Decision: guilty or not? (people of CA vs Collins, 1968) [5]

- ▶ Robbery, LA 1964, fuzzy evidence of the offenders:
 - ▶ female, around 65 kg
 - ▶ wearing something dark
 - ▶ hair of light color, between light and dark blond, in a ponytail
- ▶ At the same time, additional evidence close to the crime scene:
 - ▶ loud scream, yelling, looking at the this direction
 - ...
 - ▶ a woman sitting into a yellow car
 - ▶ car starts immediately and passes close to the additional witness
 - ▶ a black man with beard and moustache was driving
- ▶ No more evidence
- ▶ Testimony of both the victim and the witness not unambiguous (didn't recognize suspects)
- ▶ Still, the suspects were sentenced to jail.

21 / 24

Notes

Wrong use of independence assumption:

$$\begin{aligned}P(\text{yellow car}) &= 1/10 \\P(\text{man with moustache}) &= 1/4 \\P(\text{black man with beard}) &= 1/10 \\P(\text{woman with pony tail}) &= 1/10 \\P(\text{woman blond hair}) &= 1/3 \\P(\text{mix race pair in a car}) &= 1/1000\end{aligned}$$

and mistakenly confusing probability

$$P(\text{randomly selected pair matches discussed characteristics})$$

giving $P = 1/12000000$. Think about total California population.

with the needed conditional probability: $P(\text{a pair matching characteristics is guilty})$

"The court noted that the correct statistical inference would be the probability that no other couple who could have committed the robbery had the same traits as the defendants given that at least one couple had the identified traits. The court noted, in an appendix to its decision, that using this correct statistical inference, even if the prosecutor's statistics were all correct and independent as he assumed, the probability that the defendants were innocent would be over 40%." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People_v._Collins

Decision: guilty or not? (people of CA vs Collins, 1968) [5]

$$P(\text{yellow car}) = 1/10$$

$$P(\text{man with moustache}) = 1/4$$

$$P(\text{black man with beard}) = 1/10$$

$$P(\text{woman with pony tail}) = 1/10$$

$$P(\text{woman blond hair}) = 1/3$$

$$P(\text{mix race pair in a car}) = 1/1000$$

Assume (wrong!) mutual independence:

$$P(?) = \frac{1}{12,000,000}$$

What probability?

- A Convicted pair not guilty.
- B A randomly selected pair matches characteristics.
- C Some other.

people of CA vs Collins, 1968, [1]

Computed (wrongly):

$$P_r = P(\text{randomly selected pair matches discussed characteristics}) = \frac{1}{12,000,000}$$

Judge needs:

$P(\text{a pair matching characteristics is guilty}) = ?$

$$P(\text{randomly selected pair does not match}) = 1 - P_r$$

possible/existing pairs in California ... N

$$P(\text{pair will never appear in } N) = P(NA) = (1 - P_r)^N$$

$$P(\text{pair will appear at least once in } N) = P(ALO) = 1 - P(NA) = 1 - (1 - P_r)^N$$

$$P(\text{pair will appear exactly once in } N) = P(EO) = NP_r(1 - P_r)^{N-1}$$

$$P(\text{pair will appear more than once in } N) = P(MTO) = P(ALO) - P(EO)$$

$$P(MTO|ALO) = \frac{P(MTO, ALO)}{P(ALO)} = \frac{P(MTO)}{P(ALO)}$$

$$P(MTO|ALO) = \frac{1 - (1 - P_r)^N - NP_r(1 - P_r)^{N-1}}{1 - (1 - P_r)^N}$$

$P(MTO|ALO) = f(N)$; people of CA vs Collins, 1968

$P(MTO|ALO)$; Probability of more matching pairs if one exists

