

A Probabilistic Formulation of Murphy Dynamics as Applied to the Analysis of Operational Research Problems

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Abstract

The author contends that the formulation of Murphy's Law as presently accepted in the open literature is useful only as a general statement of life patterns, but meaningless to the application of operational research problems. In fact, the direct application may be dangerously wrong.

A more satisfactory statement is that if anything can go wrong, it might. This formulation not only better fits the facts of life, but can lend itself to a mathematical formulation that can be used in the analysis of operational research problems. Such a formulation is presented based on a probabilistic model of operational realizations. Numerous examples of direct applications are cited.

1. Introduction

The classical formulation of Murphy's Law as proposed

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 by Edsall Murphy ⁽¹⁾ is as follows:

“If anything can go wrong it will.”

This is an absolute statement of the transpiring events and is conditional only on possibility. The oft-cited example is that of the dropped jelly bread. Murphy’s Law would state that the bread would always fall jelly side down. This, however, is in direct conflict with experimental data as extracted from reference 2 and shown in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, Murphy’s Law is only 88% correct. It is precisely this difference that causes the problem in operational research problems.

Table 1

Jelly Bread Experimentation

| No. of Trials | Jelly Side Up | Jelly Side Down | Bread | Jelly |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 227 | 14 | 213 | Wheat | Grape |
| 314 1/2 ⁽²⁾ | 26 1/2 | 288 | White | Strawberry |
| 37 | 0 ⁽³⁾ | 37 | Potato | Orange marmalade with sardines |
| 176 | 39 | 137 | Rye | Cream cheese and apple jelly |
| 200 | 20 | 180 | Pumpernickel | Guava |
| 14 | 6 | 7 | Russian rye ⁽⁴⁾ | Mint jelly |

- 1 () Murphy, Edsall. *The Physical Universe*. Naples, Italy: Gross-Press, July 1723.
- 2 () One experimental trial was half consumed by an experimenter and may have presented a physically significant different set of parameters.
- 3 () The lack of an entry here is deemed insignificant and is attributed to sample size.
- 4 () The Russian rye used in the experiment was somewhat stale, and one trial actually landed on edge.

| | | | | |
|----------|---------|------|---------|---|
| 1712 | 206 | 1506 | Various | Peanut butter and various jellies |
| 2680 1/2 | 311 1/2 | 2368 | | |

Although the current formulation is new, its presence is not unknown. Witness, for example, the Harvard Law of animal behavior:

“Under precisely controlled experimental procedures, an animal will behave as it damn well pleases.”

This also was thought to be a corollary of Murphy’s Law at one time, but has been since grouped with several others to form the Generalized Uncertainty Principle (GUP) which states:

“Complex systems exhibit unexpected behavior.”

While the behavior may be unexpected, it may not be unpredictable, as we shall see.

2. The first principle law of Murphydynamics

Consider the systems delineated in the introductory section of this paper. The event space may be taken as the sum of possible events. Consider the state variable in the jelly-bread problem:

Consider also the events and their relative utilities as given in Table 2.

Table 2

Outcomes and Usefulness of Jelly Bread Experiment Events

| Event | Qualitative Usefulness | Comments |
|--------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. | Nothing | Highest There is |

| | | |
|----|----------------------|---|
| | | some conjecture as to the possibility of this event |
| 2. | Fall to an edgewise | High Least mess, most edible result |
| 3. | Falls jellyside up | Better than Nothing |
| 4. | Falls jellyside down | Potential edible result Low Murphy prediction |

Table 2 when compared to Table 1 leads to immediate conclusions. For example, the event with the highest usefulness did not occur, while the event with the lowest usefulness occurred most frequently (88%). Event two, with high usefulness, occurred only once and event three—the intermediate—occurred 12% of the time.

The conclusion is inescapable; the probability of occurrence of an event is inversely proportional to the utility, or:

This equation represents the basic formulation of Murphydynamics. It is also the embodiment of the phrase:

“If something can go wrong, it might.”

This explains why regression sometimes shows high correlation in unrelated data, or why failures occur primarily in critical items.

3. Antropy and the second law

A casual observance of the aforementioned

formulation would place a pessimistic view of what events would occur and which ones would not. For example, if one works really hard to make a highly useful item, it will hardly ever work. This is almost true, but not quite. If the basic formulation is examined again, and the proportionality is replaced with a proportional equation:

3.1 Antropy

The proportionality constant (α) is termed antropy and is a measure of failure not connected directly with the main event, such as the failure of a backup system when the primary system is still functional. ⁽⁵⁾ An example of the creative incompetence within the Navy, and the proper application of the antropy is the A-5 which was painstakingly designed as an attack aircraft (unsuccessful?) but turned out to be an excellent reconnaissance aircraft (successful?).

The antropy, however, carries with it the penalty of timing. This explains why the bureaucracy works, albeit slow, in spite of its inherent internal confusion and potential usefulness. The utility is, of course, decreased by improper timing.

3.2 Phase shift

The accumulation of antropy can cause a phase shift as well as a timing problem. The phase shift may result in the system doing things it was not designed to do

5 () Gall, John. *Systematics*. New York: Quadrangle Press, 1977.

() Parkinson, C. Northcote. *Parkinson's Law and Other Studies in Administration*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

and not doing things it was supposed to do.

Gall (Antropy is the accumulation of confusion in a system. Antropy is the accumulation of confusion in a system.) points out that the construction of the Aswan dam (which was supposed to be a boon to the Egyptian people) prevented the Nile from flooding and hence depositing its valuable silt downstream (which is now trapped behind the dam). The once fertile fields now must be fertilized. In response to this unexpected event, the Egyptian government built fertilizer plants which are powered by the electric output of the Aswan dam. In fact, the dam must run at capacity in order to power the plants which would not be needed if the dam did not exist. As can be surmised, the antropy phase shift in this sequence of events is sizable.

Antropy is the accumulation of confusion in a system.() Peter, Laurence. *The Peter Principle*. New York: Bantam, 1970.