

# Comparing general mobility and mobility by car

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**Abstract**—In the last years, the emergence of big data led scientists from diverse disciplines toward the study of general human mobility patterns. Although these recent discoveries have shed light on very interesting and fascinating aspects about human mobility, they are generally focused on global and general mobility patterns. For this reason, they do not necessarily capture phenomena related to specific types of mobility. In this work we address the following question: What are the difference between general mobility and mobility by car? To answer this question we present the results of an analysis performed on a big mobile phone dataset and on a GPS dataset storing information about car travels in Italy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the emergence of big data led scientists from diverse disciplines toward the study of human mobility, helping to discover and understand the hidden patterns in the trajectories people follow during their daily life. Such a social microscope showed that traditional mobility models adapted from the observation of particles or animals (such as Brownian motion and Lévy-flights) [1], [2] and recently from the observation of dollar bills [5], are not suitable to describe people’s movements. Indeed, at a global scale humans are characterized by a huge heterogeneity, since a power law was observed in the distribution of the characteristic distance traveled by users [3], [4]. Despite the observed heterogeneity in people’s movements, through the observation of past mobility history the whereabouts of most individuals can be predicted with a very high accuracy, higher than 80% [6], [7].

These recent discoveries have undoubtedly shed light on very interesting and fascinating aspects about human mobility. However, they are generally focused on global and *general* mobility patterns: through the analysis of GSM and other types of data describing travels with different transportation means, researchers revealed that our movements are not random, but follow their own laws. Since such laws are very general, they do not necessarily capture phenomena related to specific types of mobility. To clarify this point, let us consider movements by bike. Bikes are convenient and efficient transportation means to use within a city, but they are not suitable to cover very large distances. For this reason, while the accuracy in the predictability of bikers could not differ so much from the general pattern, the variability with respect to the characteristics traveled distance is presumably much lower, leading to a different mobility pattern.

The aim of this paper is to compare general mobility with mobility by car, trying to answer the following question: What are the differences between general mobility patterns and patterns of car travel? To address this question, we exploit a big

mobile phone dataset collected by a European mobile phone carrier and a GPS dataset consisting of the detailed spatio-temporal trajectories of travels performed by cars in Italy. By exploiting these data, we show the difference between global mobility and mobility by car in two important aspects: the distribution of radius of gyration and the distribution of time spent in the visited locations.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section II describes the dataset and highlights the main difference between GSM and GPS data. Section III briefly describes the individual mobility measures we used to unveil the patterns, while Section IV presents a comparison between GSM and GPS patterns. Finally, Section V concludes the paper, providing some conclusions.

## II. DATA DESCRIPTION: GSM VS GPS

Mobile phones are nowadays very common technological devices offering a good proxy to capture individual trajectories. Indeed, each time a user makes a call the carrier records the tower that communicates with the phone, effectively pinpointing users’ location. Unfortunately, this information is not terribly accurate because an individual could be anywhere within the tower’s reception area, which can span tens of square miles. Furthermore, the location is usually recorded only when a person uses her phone, providing little information about the whereabouts between calls. Since call patterns are bursty [8], for most of the time the actual position of a user is unknown.

In the current study, we exploit a GSM dataset collected by a European mobile phone carrier for billing and operational purposes. It contains temporal (date and time) and spatial (the cell phone tower’s coordinates) information of all calls and text messages sent by 3 million costumers<sup>1</sup>. Table I shows an example of phone records. In order to select the most reliable users for our purpose, we restricted our period of observation to three months and applied some filters to the data. For each user, we discarded locations visited only once during the entire period of observation, and those with a number of calls less than 0.05% of the total<sup>2</sup>. Then, from the resulting dataset we deleted all users who visited only a single location, and those with a call frequency less than twelve calls per day on average during the period of observation. The filtering phase resulted in a final dataset of 67,000 active users.

<sup>1</sup>to guarantee anonymity, each user is identified with an anonymized security key.

<sup>2</sup>this means that a location  $i$  is deleted if  $n_i/N < 0.005$ , where  $n_i$  is the number of calls performed in the tower  $i$ , and  $N$  the total number of calls performed by the user.

Timestamp	Coordinates	Caller	Callee	Type
2008/04/01 - 23:45:00	(32.567, -2.642)	A45J23	F45J23	SMS
2008/04/02 - 06:02:10	(33.282, -2.221)	K65232	V56YT4	Call

TABLE I. EXAMPLE OF PHONE RECORDS IN THE GSM DATASET.

Unlike GSM data, GPS traces provide high resolution location data, storing the geodetic coordinates with an average sampling rate of few seconds. Even though these features are ideal in making a refined statistical analysis of human mobility patterns, relatively few works in literature are based on GPS data, mainly due to the difficulty to obtain complete traces covering movements along the whole day. In this work, we have access to a GPS dataset that stores information of approximately 9.8 Million different car travels from 159,000 cars tracked during one month (May 2011) in an area of 250km×250km in central Italy. The GPS traces are collected by Octo Telematics Italia Srl<sup>3</sup>, a company that provides a data collection service for insurance companies. Since GPS data do not provide explicit information about visited locations, we assigned each origin and destination point of the travels to the corresponding Italian census cell, according to information provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics<sup>4</sup>. After such aggregation, many users are found to have only one visited location. We discarded them and took into account only those users with the most frequent location (most likely their home or work) inside the region of Tuscany. These filtering operations produced a dataset of 46,121 users, where a travel is described by a timestamp and a pair of coordinates corresponding to the centroids of the origin and destination cells of the travel (Table II).

Timestamp	Origin	Destination	Car
2011/05/12 - 08:31:20	(32.567, -2.546)	(32.7, -2.511)	F45J23
2011/05/24 - 17:53:08	(32.1982, -2.333)	(33.123, -2.31)	H2705L

TABLE II. EXAMPLE OF RECORDS IN THE GPS DATASET.

Table III summarizes a few properties of the data described above. It is worth noting that GPS data provide us information about displacements performed by car only. For this reason, we have a partial knowledge about the whole mobility of individuals. Conversely, GSM data may provide information about travels made using all transportation means, although they are actually recorded only when a user calls before and after the trip.

Dataset	Volume	Conveyance	Precision
GPS	46,121 users	Cars	High
GSM	67,000 users	Many	Low

TABLE III. SUMMARY OF PROPERTIES OF OUR DATASETS.

### III. MOBILITY MEASURES

In order to explore the statistical properties of the mobility patterns, we computed several individual mobility measures for each user.

The **center of mass**  $r_{cm}$  of a user represents the pivot of his/her

individual mobility. Mathematically, it is a two-dimensional vector representing the weighted mean of the visited locations:

$$\vec{r}_{cm} = \frac{1}{W} \sum_{i=1}^L w_i \vec{r}_i \quad (1)$$

where  $L$  is the total number of distinct towers/cells visited by the user/car;  $\vec{r}_i$  is a two-dimensional vector representing the geographic coordinates of tower/cell  $i$ ;  $w_i$  is the weight assigned to location  $i$ ; and  $W$  the sum of the weights over all locations. Depending on the measure considered to evaluate the weight of a location, two different centers of mass can be defined. The *frequency-based* center of mass weights locations according to their visitation frequency, hence  $w_i$  is the number of calls/arrivals performed in location  $i$ . In the *time-based* center of mass we take  $w_i$  as the total time spent by the user in location  $i$ .

Another interesting measure of an individual's central position is the most frequent location  $L_1$ , i.e. the location where he/she can be located with the highest probability, which is most likely the home or work place. Such measure can be computed in a very straightforward way by simply taking the tower/cell from which the user performs the highest number of calls/arrivals.

The *radius of gyration* of a user [3], [4] is a mobility measure representing the characteristic distance traveled by each individual. It is a concept borrowed from physics, defined as the root mean square of the weighted sum of all locations' distances from the center of mass:

$$r_g = \sqrt{\frac{1}{W} \sum_{i=1}^L w_i (\vec{r}_i - \vec{r}_{cm})^2} \quad (2)$$

where  $\vec{r}_{cm}$  is the vector of coordinates representing the center of mass. We computed two types of radius of gyration: i)  $r_g$  with respect to the frequency-based center of mass, i.e.  $w_i$  is the total number of calls/arrivals in  $i$ ; ii)  $r_g$  with respect to the time-based center of mass, i.e.  $w_i$  is the total time spent in  $i$ .

### IV. RESULTS

In this section, we compare the patterns found on the two datasets, highlighting the main differences between general mobility and mobility by car.

Figure 1 shows the distributions of frequency- and time-based radii of gyration computed on the GSM dataset. There is no significant difference between the two curves, which practically coincide. Conversely, a sharp difference clearly emerges from the distributions of radii in the GPS case (Figure ??). Indeed, the time-based distribution is shifted towards shorter radii, and peaks at 2km instead of 5km. One possible interpretation of this phenomenon is that cars are usually parked for a long time in locations close to the center of mass (like home and work locations). This effect is absent in GSM data because people can continue their call activity even while being stationary.

Moreover, while the GSM curves decrease over the entire range, GPS radii show a growing value up to  $\approx 2$ km. This is presumably due to the tendency of covering those small distances by foot, bike, or bus, resulting in a lower probability

<sup>3</sup><http://www.octotelematics.it>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.istat.it>

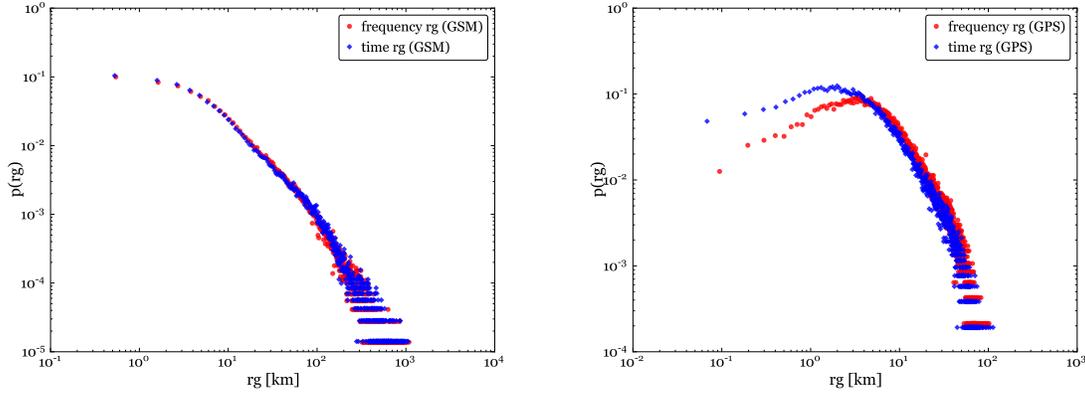


Fig. 1. Frequency- and time-based probability distributions of  $r_g$  for GSM (left) and GPS (right) users.

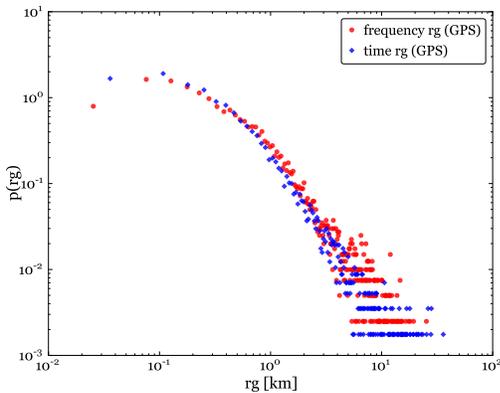


Fig. 2. Frequency- and time-based probability distributions of  $r_g$  for GSM users in a particular region of the country.

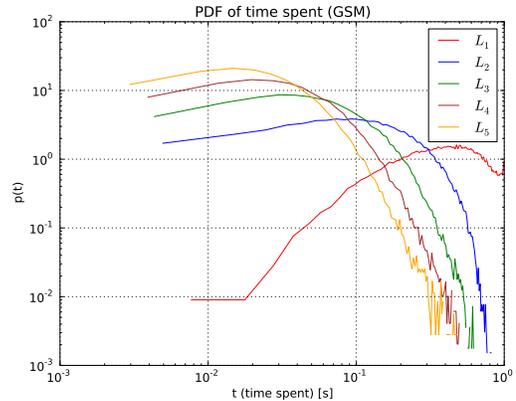


Fig. 3. Distribution of fraction of time spent in the five most frequent locations (GSM dataset).

to find such travels in the GPS dataset.

To test at what extent the differences in the distribution of  $r_g$  are due by the geographic scale (GSM data refers to a whole country, while GPS to a single region), we computed the  $r_g$  distribution of those GSM users having the most frequent location in a region of the country of a size and population comparable to Tuscany. In the computation of the radius, only the locations within the region are taken into account. As Figure 2 shows, the distribution of the radius does not change significantly, suggesting that the shape of the curves, and their slopes, are rather independent from the scale and are related to the portion of mobility they represent.

Another interesting mobility aspect we investigated is the distribution of the time spent across the visited locations. Figure 3 shows the GSM distribution of time spent for the five most frequent locations. As we can see, the time spent is clearly unbalanced in favor of the most important location  $L_1$ . This is reasonable, because the most frequent location usually corresponds to user's home or work place, which are the locations where an individual spends most of the time. The plot also suggests that time is proportional to frequency: the more a user visit a location, the more time she spends there. Such phenomenon is confirmed by Figure 4, where the correlation, though not perfectly linear, is evident.

The same pattern is also observed on GPS data, although the difference between  $L_1$  and the other locations is less sharp (Figure 5). It is worth to note that in both plots,  $L_1$  intersects the other curves approximately at the same points. This is very interesting because, independently from the geographical scale and from the portion of mobility considered, beyond a certain fraction of time is much more likely for a user to be located in the  $L_1$  than all the other locations.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our data-driven analysis showed the difference between general mobility and mobility by car regarding two aspects: the distribution of radius of gyration and the distribution of time spent in the visited locations. We discovered that, regardless the geographic scale, the shape of the  $r_g$  distribution is different since mobility by car tends to poorly cover displacements within small distances. However, in both cases the distribution of time spent in visited locations present a clear dominance by the most frequent location  $L_1$ , with such dominance more pronounced in the GSM dataset. Moreover, the  $L_1$  curve intersect the others approximately at the same points in both cases, hinting the presence of a general pattern underlying the phenomenon.

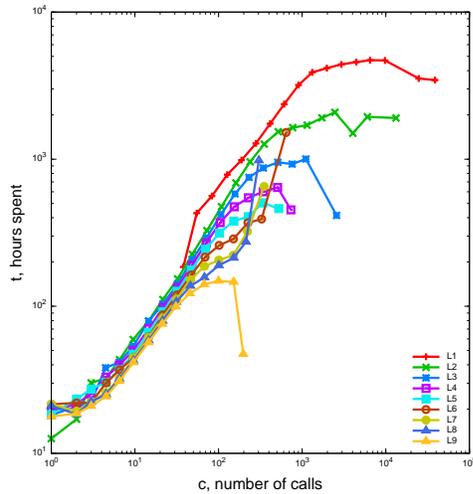


Fig. 4. Correlation between calls and time spent in the ten most frequent locations (GSM dataset).

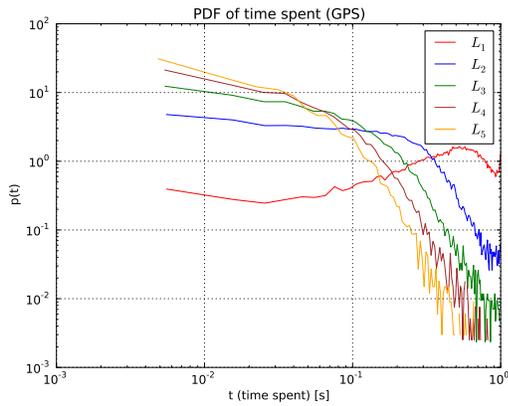


Fig. 5. Distribution of fraction of time spent in the five most frequent locations (GPS dataset).

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