Scientists uncover principles of universal self-assembly

20 April 2020

The researchers not only demonstrated the self-assembly of simple as well as complex structures that are more than four orders of magnitude different in size and mass. They all come together following a sigmoid function, also known as the S-curve. Curiously, they also observed that the individual deviations from the S-curves follow the statistics of the Tracy-Widom distribution, which manifests in diverse, social, economic, and physical systems.

"Serim and I were attending a math seminar, where we first saw this particular distribution. Serim looked at me and said, 'that's it; we need to search for it,' and we did." says Dr. F. Ömer Ilday of Bilkent University-UNAM, Physics, and Electrical and Electronics Engineering, co-author of the paper. The seminar was given by Dr. Gökhan Yıldırım of Bilkent University-Mathematics, another co-author, who says, "After the seminar, they approached me, the idea was fascinating, and we started working on it immediately." Dr. Ghaith Makey, the first author of the paper, adds, "What motivates us nowadays is to predict and study new examples of systems in Tracy-Widom universality, and understand why it manifests in very many different systems."

The team further demonstrated how their method could be useful for practical applications. "The possibilities are endless. For instance, an unknown infection is detected at a hospital's ICU. Instead of waiting for hours or days to identify the culprit pathogen, within minutes, you can take a sample, add candidate drugs, see if they put an end to the infection." says Dr. E. Doruk Engin of Ankara University-Biotechnology Institute. "It was unbelievable to see how easily living organisms could be manipulated within seconds," says Dr. Özgür Şahin of Bilkent University-Molecular Biology and Genetics, and also of the University of South Carolina. Dr. Hilmi Volkan Demir of Bilkent University-UNAM, Physics, and Electrical and Electronics Engineering and also of NTU.
Singapore, a co-author of the paper, adds "such instant control over tiny speedy quantum matter is in many ways beyond the capabilities of current technology. It can have a real impact on nanotechnology."

Researchers emphasize that this is by no means the end of the story, that self-assembly research has a long and rough road ahead in discovering and practicing mother nature's principles. Dr. Serim Ilday adds, "Possible practical uses aside, our method is a great tool for exploring the physics of how driven systems evolve far from equilibrium. This includes epidemics; in fact, our preliminary analysis of COVID-19 data suggests that its fluctuations may be following the Tracy-Widom statistics just like our system." Dr. F. Ömer Ilday adds, "More interestingly, our analytical model fits COVID data better than the S-curve. Seeing all these, we decided to investigate the physics of the pandemic promptly."

[https://doi.org/10.1038/s41567-020-0879-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41567-020-0879-8),
[https://www.nature.com/articles/s41567-020-0879-8](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41567-020-0879-8)

Provided by Bilkent University Faculty of Science