Conflation: its logic and some applications

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Conflation

We conflate when we treat multiple things as one.

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eg:	
one ant	and another ant,
proper mass	and relativistic mass,
mass	and weight,
slenderness	and health,
tampering with votes	and reading/revealing emails,
$\forall x \exists y R(x, y)$	and $\exists y \forall x R(x, y)$,
substance dualism	and property dualism.

Getting clear on conflation can help us
see the value of distinctions.

It can help us diagnose misunderstandings,
both popular and academic.

And it turns out to shed light on some longstanding
philosophical problems.

The logic of conflation

Sometimes people say logic can only apply after all conflations have been removed.

This needlessly hamstrings logic: unrecognized conflations are likely to be rampant, and some distinctions are not worth drawing.

I'm interested in logical theories of the social norms that constitute the meanings of our words.

When I write $\Gamma \vdash \Delta$, this means it is out of bounds to assert everything in Γ and deny everything in Δ. This is a kind of validity.

Vocabulary meanings are given in terms of conditions on $\vdash$.

$$\frac{A, B, \Gamma \vdash \Delta}{A \wedge B, \Gamma \vdash \Delta} \qquad \frac{\Gamma \vdash \Delta, A \qquad \Gamma \vdash \Delta, B}{\Gamma \vdash \Delta, A \wedge B}$$

The left rule: to assert $A \wedge B$
is to assert both A and B.

The right rule: $A \wedge B$ is undeniable
iff both A and B are.

$$\frac{A, \Gamma \vdash \Delta \qquad B, \Gamma \vdash \Delta}{A \vee B, \Gamma \vdash \Delta} \qquad \frac{\Gamma \vdash \Delta, A, B}{\Gamma \vdash \Delta, A \vee B}$$

The left rule: $A \vee B$ is unassertible iff both A and B are.

The right rule: to deny $A \vee B$ is to deny both A and B.

Thesis zero:

All conflation results in propositional conflation.

Thesis one:

It is distinctions that undermine validity,
not conflations.

Thesis two:

If conflation affects the validity of an argument,
it must be that some conflation occurs in the argument.

Here are the rules for the connective funk
(so dubbed by Teijeiro):

$$\frac{A, B, \Gamma \vdash \Delta}{A \otimes B, \Gamma \vdash \Delta} \qquad \frac{\Gamma \vdash \Delta, A, B}{\Gamma \vdash \Delta, A \otimes B}$$

$A \otimes B$ has the assertability conditions of $A \wedge B$
and the deniability conditions of $A \vee B$.

It is the conflation of A and B.

Two applications

The conflation theory of vagueness:

Vague predicates express the conflation of their precisifications.

So ‘tall’ expresses $(\geq 169\text{cm}) \otimes (\geq 170\text{cm}) \otimes \ldots$.

The conflation theory explains tolerance:

Alice is $\geq$ 170cm tall, Alice is within 1cm in height of Zebra

$\vdash$ Zebra is $\geq$ 169cm tall

—SO—

Alice is tall, Alice is within 1cm in height of Zebra $\vdash$ Zebra is tall

It diagnoses the sorites argument as equivocation.

Each step is valid, but they cannot be chained together.

The conflation theory explains borderline contradictions:

Alice is exactly 169cm tall

$\vdash$ Alice is $\geq$ 169cm tall and not $\geq$ 170cm tall

—SO—

Alice is exactly 169cm tall $\vdash$ Alice is tall and not tall

The conflation theory of slurs

Slurs express the conflation of group membership with group-membership-and-X, where X is ‘despicable because of it’, a more specific stereotype, recommended treatment, etc.

So ‘boche’ expresses German $\otimes$ (German $\wedge$ cruel $\wedge \ldots$)

According to Dummett, what matters is permissible inference.

One may infer ‘A is boche’ from ‘A is German’,
and infer ‘A is cruel’ from ‘A is boche’.

But surely one can infer ‘A is German’ too!

According to Hom, ‘boche’ expresses something like
‘ought to be discriminated against because of being cruel,
all because of being German’

But this falsely predicts that ‘A is not a boche’
should not slur Germans,
and should be compatible with A being German.

The conflation theory avoids Dummett's problem:
the conflation is not between German and cruel,
but between German and German and cruel,
and it does not care about direction of inference.

And it avoids Hom's problem:
to deny that A is boche requires denial that A is German,
and still conflates German with German and cruel.

Summary

- Conflation is a wide-ranging phenomenon.
- We can understand it through funk:
  conflations are assertible when related conjunctions are,
  and deniable when related disjunctions are.
- The conflation theory of vagueness explains tolerance,
  and diagnoses the sorites as equivocation.
- The conflation theory of slurs fixes problems
  with Dummett's and Hom's semantic theories.