Conflict Management in Dempster-Shafer Theory by Sequential Discounting Using the Degree of Falsity

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Abstract

In this paper we develop a method for conflict management within Dempster-Shafer theory. The idea is that each piece of evidence is discounted in proportion to the degree that it contributes to the conflict. This way the contributors of conflict are managed on a case–by–case basis in relation to the problem they cause. Discounting is performed in a sequence of incremental steps, with conflict updated at each step, until the overall conflict is brought down exactly to a predefined acceptable level.

Keywords: Dempster-Shafer theory, belief function, conflict, conflict management, discounting.

1 Introduction

In this paper we develop a method for conflict management within Dempster-Shafer theory [3, 4, 19–21, 24, 25] where it is assumed that all belief functions are referring to the same problem or alternatively that they are false.

In general a high degree of conflict is seen as if there is a representation error in the frame of discernment, while a small conflict may be the result of measuring errors.

One type of representation error resulting in high conflict is when belief functions concerning different subproblems that should be handled independently are erroneously combined [10, 11]. When this is the case the assumption that all belief functions combined must refer to the same problem (*not* different subproblems) is violated.

We may interpret the conflict as metalevel evidence stating that at least one piece of evidence in the combination should not be part of that combination. By temporarily removing (and replacing) each belief function from the combination, one at a time, we induce a drop in conflict. This is used to derive metalevel evidence regarding each individual belief function indicating that this particular belief function does not belong to the problem in question.

When assuming that there is only one problem at hand, such metalevel evidence must be interpreted as a proposition about the falsity of this belief function. A normalization of the drop in conflict will be shown to be the degree of falsity of that belief function.

However, instead of directly discounting each piece of evidence to its individual degree of falsity we take an incremental step in that direction for all belief functions. Based on these initial discounts we recalculate conflict and update all degrees of falsities. The process is performed sequentially until a predefined level of maximal acceptable conflict is reached. With this sequential approach we obtain a smooth discounting process (compared to if we would have fully discounted each belief function to its degree of falsity) and we are able to exactly match any level of acceptable conflict without risk of overshooting.

An alternative way to manage the conflict is to assume that there are different subproblems

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where the set of basic belief assignments (bbas) may be distributed to different clusters that should be handled separately [2, 10–18].

Another approach also using meta-knowledge regarding the reliability of the source is *contextual discounting* [7]. A recent overview of different alternatives for conflict management when combining conflicting belief functions was given by Smets, see [23].

In Section 2 we investigate the degree of falsity of a piece of evidence. In Section 3 we develop a method of sequential incremental discounting using the degree of falsity. We perform an experiment to investigate the behavior of an algorithm for conflict management in Section 4. Finally, conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2 Degree of falsity

Let us recapitulate the interpretation of conflict as if there is at least one piece of evidence that violates the representation given by the frame of discernment, and thus can be said *not* to belong to the set of bbas that refer to this problem χ [11].

A conflict in χ is thus interpreted as a piece of metalevel evidence that there is at least one piece of evidence that does not belong to the subset,

$$\begin{aligned} m_\chi(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi) &= c^{(0,0)}, \\ m_\chi(\Theta) &= 1 - c^{(0,0)}, \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where $c^{(0,0)}$ is the initial conflict in χ.

Let us observe one piece of evidence e_q in χ. If e_q is taken out from χ the conflict $c^{(0,0)}$ in χ decreases to $c^{(0,q)}$. This decrease in conflict can be interpreted as follows: there exists some metalevel evidence indicating that e_q does not belong to χ,

$$\begin{aligned} &m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi), \\ &m_{\Delta\chi}(\Theta), \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

and the remainder of the conflict $c^{(0,q)}$ after e_q has been taken out from χ is metalevel evidence that there is at least one other piece of evidence e_j, $j \neq q$, that does not belong to $\chi - \{e_q\}$,

$$\begin{aligned} m_{\chi - \{e_q\}}(\exists j \neq q.e_j \notin (\chi - \{e_q\})) &= c^{(0,q)}, \\ m_\chi(\Theta) &= 1 - c^{(0,q)}. \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

We will derive the basic belief number (bbn) $m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi)$ by stating that the belief in the proposition that there is at least one piece of evidence that does not belong to χ, $\exists j.e_j \notin \chi$, should be equal no matter whether we base that belief on the original piece of metalevel evidence, before e_q is taken out from χ, or on a combination of the other two pieces of metalevel evidence $m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi)$ and $m_{\chi - \{e_q\}}(\exists j \neq q.e_j \notin (\chi - \{e_q\}))$, after e_q is taken out from χ, i.e.,

$$\mathrm{Bel}_\chi(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi) = \mathrm{Bel}_{\Delta\chi \oplus (\chi - \{e_q\})}(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi). \tag{4}$$

We have, on the left hand side (LHS),

$$\mathrm{Bel}_\chi(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi) = m_\chi(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi) = c^{(0,0)} \tag{5}$$

and, on the right hand side (RHS),

$$\begin{aligned} &\mathrm{Bel}_{\Delta\chi \oplus (\chi - \{e_q\})}(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi) \\ &\quad = m_{\Delta\chi \oplus (\chi - \{e_q\})}(\exists j.e_j \notin \chi) \\ &\qquad + m_{\Delta\chi \oplus (\chi - \{e_q\})}(\exists j \neq q.e_j \notin (\chi - \{e_q\})) \\ &\qquad + m_{\Delta\chi \oplus (\chi - \{e_q\})}(e_q \notin \chi) \\ &\quad = m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) m_{(\chi - \{e_q\})}(\exists j \neq q.e_j \notin (\chi - \{e_q\})) \\ &\qquad + m_{\Delta\chi}(\Theta) m_{(\chi - \{e_q\})}(\exists j \neq q.e_j \notin (\chi - \{e_q\})) \\ &\qquad + m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) m_{(\chi - \{e_q\})}(\Theta) \\ &\quad = m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) c^{(0,q)} \\ &\qquad + [1 - m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi)] c^{(0,q)} \\ &\qquad + m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi)(1 - c^{(0,q)}) \\ &\quad = c^{(0,q)} + m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi)(1 - c^{(0,q)}). \end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

Setting LHS = RHS, we get

$$\begin{aligned} m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) &= \frac{c^{(0,0)} - c^{(0,q)}}{1 - c^{(0,q)}}, \\ m_{\Delta\chi}(\Theta) &= \frac{1 - c^{(0,0)}}{1 - c^{(0,q)}}. \end{aligned} \tag{7}$$

This is the degree of falsity of e_q under the assumption that we are dealing with one problem, *not* several different subproblems.

3 Sequential incremental discounting

In this section we investigate how to manage the conflict on an individual case–by–case basis using the degree of falsity.

If $m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) = 1$ then e_q is certainly false and must not be used in the combination. This becomes the situation when $c^{(0,0)} = 1$ for any $c^{(0,q)} < 1$. For $c^{(0,q)} = 1$ we define $m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) = 0$ as the proposition is not supported when conflict remains unchanged, equal to 1. When $m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) = 0$ then we have no indication regarding the falsity of e_q and will take no additional action. This is the situation when we observe no change in conflict $c^{(0,0)} = c^{(0,q)}$. When $0 < m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi) < 1$, then e_q contributes to the overall conflict and its conflict contribution must be managed. We would then like to pay less regard to a piece of evidence the higher the degree is that it is false, pay no attention to it when it is certainly false, and leave it unchanged when there is no indication as to its falsity. This can be done by using the discounting operation.

The discounting operation was introduced to handle the case when the source of some piece of evidence is lacking in credibility [19]. The credibility of the source, α, also became the credibility of the piece of evidence. The situation was handled by discounting each supported proposition other than Θ with the credibility α and by adding the discounted mass to Θ;

$$m^{\%}(A_j) = \begin{cases} \alpha m(A_j) & A_j \neq \Theta \\ 1 - \alpha + \alpha m(\Theta) & A_j \neq \Theta \end{cases}. \tag{8}$$

We will use the same discounting operation in this case when there is a direct indication for each separate piece of evidence regardless of which source produced it.

As the degree of falsity of e_q is proportional to the conflict that e_q contributes to the overall conflict we discount it using its credibility. The conflict in Dempster's rule when combining all pieces of evidence regarding e_q, as identical to one minus the credibility of the evidence;

$$\alpha_q = 1 - m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi). \tag{9}$$

At step d, $c^{(d,0)}$ represents the conflict in χ after d sequential discounts of all bbas, and $c^{(d,q)}$ is the remaining conflict we would have in χ after d sequential discounts of all bbas if e_q is taken out from χ at this stage before combining.

Using the credibility (degree of falsity) we may derive a set of incrementally discounted bbas $\{m_q^d\}_q$ as

$$\begin{aligned} m_q^{d+1}(A) &= \left[1 - \varepsilon\left(\frac{c^{(d,0)} - c^{(d,q)}}{1 - c^{(d,q)}}\right)\right] m_q^d(A), \quad \forall A \subset \Theta, \ A \neq \emptyset \\ m_q^{d+1}(\Theta) &= 1 - \sum_{A \subset \Theta} m_q^{d+1}(A), \end{aligned} \tag{10}$$

where $\varepsilon \ll 1$ and $\{m_q^0\}_q$ is the initial set of bbas.

Alternatively, we can also rewrite Eq. (10) as,

$$\begin{aligned} m_q^{d+1}(A) &= \prod_{i=0}^{d} \left[1 - \varepsilon\left(\frac{c^{(d,0)} - c^{(d,q)}}{1 - c^{(d,q)}}\right)\right] m_q^0(A), \quad \forall A \subset \Theta, \ A \neq \emptyset \\ m_q^{d+1}(\Theta) &= 1 - \sum_{A \subset \Theta} m_q^{d+1}(A), \end{aligned} \tag{11}$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} c^{(d,0)} &= m_\chi^d(\emptyset) = \oplus\{m_j^d\}_j(\emptyset), \\ c^{(d,q)} &= m_{\chi - \{e_q\}}^d(\emptyset) = \oplus(\{m_j^d\}_j - \{m_q^d\})(\emptyset). \end{aligned} \tag{12}$$

The combinations of all bbas in Eq. (12) using Dempster's rule is carried out by first converting all bbas to commonality functions [19],

$$Q_j^d(A) = \sum_{B \supseteq A} m_j^d(B), \quad \forall j, A \subseteq \Theta. \tag{13}$$

Secondly, we multiply all commonality functions,

$$\begin{aligned} Q_\chi^d(A) &= \prod_{j=1}^{n} Q_j^d(A), \quad \forall A \subseteq \Theta, \\ Q_{\chi - \{e_q\}}^d(A) &= \prod_{\substack{j=1 \\ \neq q}}^{n} Q_j^d(A), \quad \forall A \subseteq \Theta, \end{aligned} \tag{14}$$

to obtain the unnormalized Dempster's rule.

Finally, we convert back to bbas in order to register the received conflict. We get,

$$
\begin{aligned}
m_\chi^d(A) &= \sum_{B \supseteq A} (-1)^{|B-A|} Q_\chi^d(B), \\
m_{\chi-\{e_q\}}^d(A) &= \sum_{B \supseteq A} (-1)^{|B-A|} Q_{\chi-\{e_q\}}^d(B).
\end{aligned} \tag{15}
$$

When $A \equiv \varnothing$, this can be simplified to

$$
\begin{aligned}
m_\chi^d(\varnothing) &= \sum_B (-1)^{|B|} Q_\chi^d(B), \\
m_{\chi-\{e_q\}}^d(\varnothing) &= \sum_B (-1)^{|B|} Q_{\chi-\{e_q\}}^d(B),
\end{aligned} \tag{16}
$$

i.e., when we are only interested in the conflict. Here, $c^{(d,0)} = m_\chi^d(\varnothing)$ and $c^{(d,q)} = m_{\chi-\{e_q\}}^d(\varnothing)$. Using Eq. (10) we now obtain the sought after discounted bbas at the next step $d + 1$.

In each situation the bbas are sequentially discounted by repeated use of Eq. (10) and Eq. (12), followed by combination using Eq. (13), Eq. (14) and Eq. (15), see Figure 1.

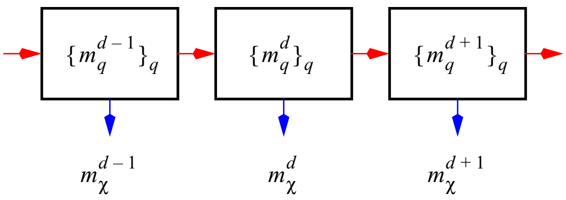

Figure 1. The process of sequential discounting and combination. Red arrows is sequential discounting. Blue arrows are combination.

In Algorithm 1 we describe an algorithm for performing sequential incremental discounting of all bbas.

The maximum conflict allowed is considered to be a domain dependent parameter.

4 An experiment

In this section we conduct an experiment with ten bbas over a frame of discernment with three elements and seven possible focal elements. We study the combination of the bbas and the use of conflict management through their sequential discounting using the degree of falsity and a gain factor of $\varepsilon = 0.1$. In an experiment with higher gain factors (not shown), e.g. $\varepsilon = 0.3$, the curves of m_χ^d evidently become step-wise linear.

Algorithm 1: Algorithm for sequential incremental discounting

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INITIALIZE

$m_q^0(A)$, $\forall q, A \subseteq \Theta$ (the bbas); k ($0 < k < 1$, the maximum conflict allowed); $\varepsilon = 0.1$ (a gain factor); $d = -1$;

REPEAT

$d = d + 1$;

Calculate $c^{(d,0)}$ using Eq. (12);

Calculate $c^{(d,q)}$, $\forall q$ using Eq. (12);

Calculate $m_q^{d+1}(A)$, $\forall q, A \subseteq \Theta$ using Eq. (10);

UNTIL

$c^{(d,0)} \le k$;

RETURN

$\{m_q^d\}_q$;

Each bba has a random number of focal elements $n_q \in [1, |2^\Theta| - 1]$, where the number n_q is drawn with a uniform probability within the interval. The n_q focal elements are then drawn with a uniform probability $p = 1/(|2^\Theta| - 1)$ from the set $2^\Theta - \{\Theta\}$. With probability 1 we include Θ in the bba. Each focal element is given a random bbn drawn uniformly from $[0, \beta]$, $\beta \le 1$, where β is chosen such that the bbns sum up to 1. As these bbas are constructed randomly, they are not constructed with any particular problem in sight, they are bound to be highly conflicting and a challenging test case.

Let us observe the process of sequential incremental discounting. At each step d in the sequential discounting we calculate the degree of falsity for all bbas. However, instead of discounting each bba to its full degree of falsity

$$
\alpha^{(0,q)} = 1 - m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi), \tag{17}
$$

as was done in [11], we take an incremental step in that direction by assigning

$$\alpha_{\varepsilon}^{(d,q)} = 1 - \varepsilon m_{\Delta\chi}(e_q \notin \chi), \tag{18}$$

where ε is a gain factor, $\varepsilon \ll 1$. In our experiments we use Algorithm 1 with $\varepsilon = 0.1$. We have

$$\alpha_{\varepsilon}^{(d,q)} = 1 - \varepsilon\left(\frac{c^{(d,0)} - c^{(d,q)}}{1 - c^{(d,q)}}\right) \tag{19}$$

at step d, where $c^{(d,0)}$ and $c^{(d,0)}$ are calculated using Eq. (12).

In Figure 2 we observe the conflict when we combine the ten bbas with Dempster's rule after different numbers of successively performed incremental discounts.

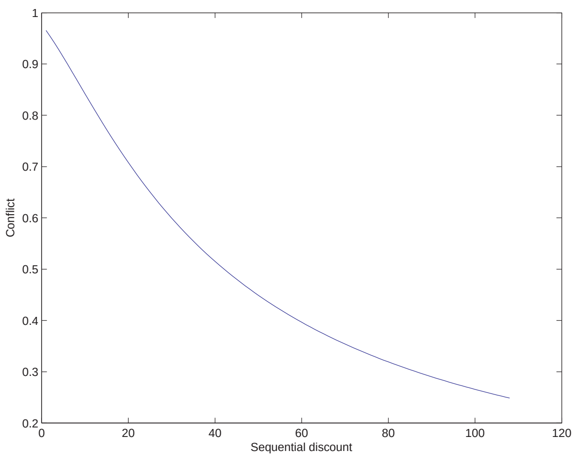

Figure 2. Conflict decreasing with sequential incremental discounting.

We notice an initial steady decline in conflict which is later somewhat moderated. As the conflict may be interpreted as a piece of metalevel evidence that there is something wrong with the representation of the problem we should at least request a conflict less or equal to 0.5. This level is reached after 42 incremental discounts.

In Figure 3 we observe the sequential incremental discounting factor $\alpha_{\varepsilon}^{(d,q)}$ for different bbas e_q. The initial discounting varies strongly between 1–5% where the discounting $\alpha_{\varepsilon}^{(d,q)}$ is proportional to the degree of credibility $\alpha^{(d,q)} = 1 - m(e_q \notin \chi)$.

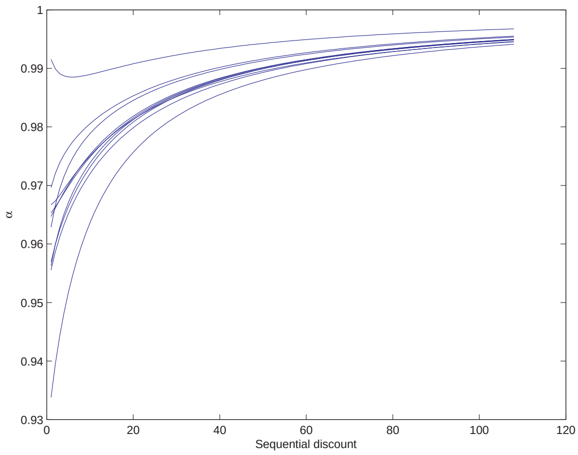

Figure 3. Sequential $\alpha_{\varepsilon}^{(d,q)}$ for ten bbas $\{e_q\}_{q=1}^{10}$, for successive steps d with $\varepsilon = 0.1$.

As examples of how the bbas are changed by the sequential discounting, let us observe this for four different bbas in Figure 4. In each case the blue line corresponds to $m_q^d(\Theta)$ and the other lines correspond to other focal elements $A \subset \Theta$. From these examples we notice especially the increase of nonspecificity in the bbas as support for $m_q^d(\Theta)$ increases with discounting.

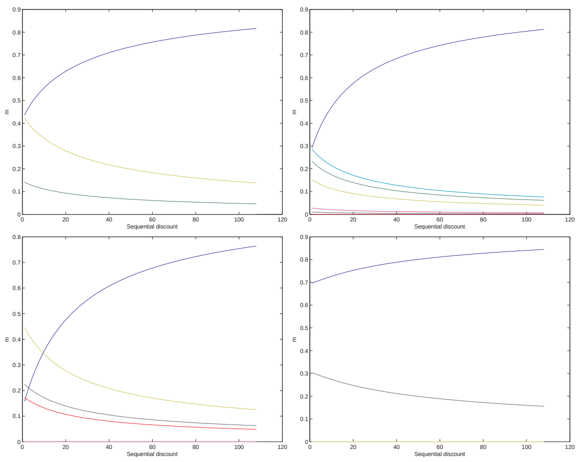

Figure 4. Four different bbas sequentially discounted; $m_q^d(\Theta)$ blue line.

The successive combination of the ten bbas are shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6, without and with normalization, respectively. At each step d each bba is first discounted. After discounting, all bbas are combined. This process is illustrated in Figure 1. In Figure 5 we observe at each step the combined result, where the bbns are shown in blue (except for $m_\chi^d(\varnothing)$, red, and $m_\chi^d(\Theta)$, green). The bbns for identical focal elements at different steps are shown as curves.

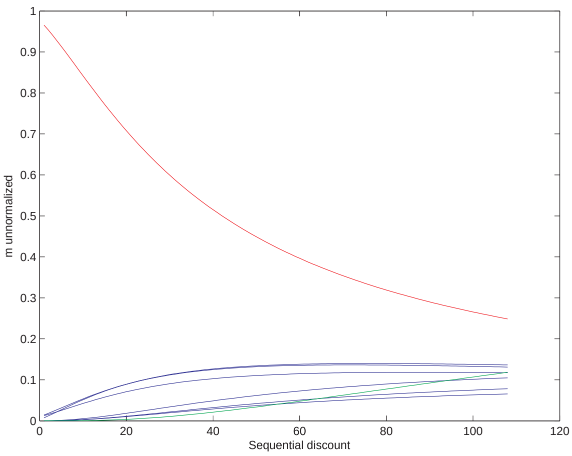

Figure 5. Combination of sequentially discounted bbas without normalization. Red line is $m_\chi^d(\varnothing)$. Green line is $m_\chi^d(\Theta)$.

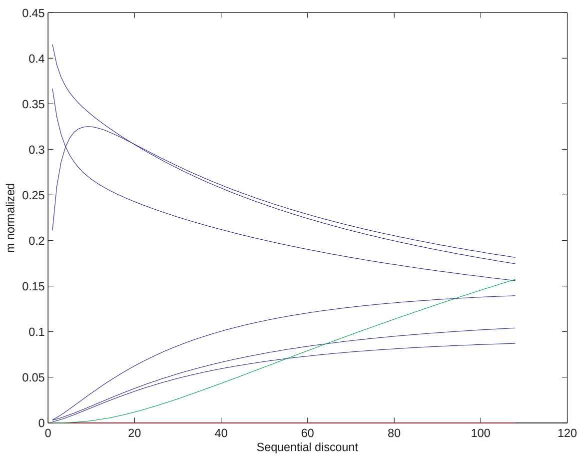

Figure 6. Combination of sequentially discounted bbas with normalization. Red line is $m_\chi^d(\varnothing)$. Green line is $m_\chi^d(\Theta)$.

In Figure 6 we notice how the preferred hypothesis changes with sequential discounting as bbas which are highly conflicting have a high degree of falsity and are more strongly discounted than others. Here, the two hypotheses that initially were 1st and 3rd, become 2nd and 1st at the 42nd sequential discount (the 50% conflict level). We notice that the last change in preference order takes place at the 20th sequential discount around the 70% conflict level. Thus, in practice k can be fairly high.

In an experiment with 10000 sequential discounts (not shown) we notice that when $d \to \infty$ then $m_q^d(\Theta) \to 1$ slowly in a logarithm-like way.

As information is lost by discounting it may be viewed as a necessary evil in order to manage the conflict (when this is high). Obviously, if a poor representation of the problem at hand (through the frame of discernment) is the cause of the conflict rather than poorly represented input data, we should change the frame of discernment. We measure the information lost by studying entropy measures [8, 9] as the sequential discounting progresses[1].

A measure of average total uncertainty (H) [9] must measure uncertainty both due to *scattering* of uncertainty (G) and uncertainty due to the *nonspecificity* (I) of supported focal elements;

$$H(m_\chi^d) = G(m_\chi^d) + I(m_\chi^d). \tag{20}$$

A measure of scattering was defined by Pal, Bezdek and Hemasinha [9] as

$$G(m_\chi^d) = -\sum_{A \in F} m_\chi^d(A)\log_2[m_\chi^d(A)], \tag{21}$$

where $F \subseteq 2^\Theta$ is the set of focal elements, i.e., $m_\chi^d(A) > 0$ whenever $A \in F$.

Dubois and Prade defined a measure of nonspecificity [5] as

$$I(m_\chi^d) = \sum_{A \in F} m_\chi^d(A)\log_2(|A|). \tag{22}$$

Based on Eq. (21) and Eq. (22) Pal, Bezdek and Hemasinha [9] then defined a measure of average total uncertainty $H(m_\chi^d)$ as the sum of the two equations,

1.The subject of total uncertainty measures is still an active research area. See for example [1].

$$
\begin{aligned}
H(m_\chi^d) &= G(m_\chi^d) + I(m_\chi^d) \\
&= -\sum_{A \in F} m_\chi^d(A)\log_2[m_\chi^d(A)] + \sum_{A \in F} m_\chi^d(A)\log_2(|A|).
\end{aligned}
\tag{23}
$$

As they pointed out in [9] this measure reduces to Shannon's entropy [22] when m_χ^d represents a probability distribution (i.e., $\forall A.\ |A| = 1$) and to Hartley's information [6] when m_χ^d is certain (i.e., $\exists A.\ m_\chi^d(A) = 1$). Obviously, the average total uncertainty reaches its minimum $H(m_\chi^d) = 0$ when both conditions apply, i.e., $\exists A.\ m_\chi^d(A) = 1\ \&\ |A| = 1$.

In Figure 7 we observe the entropy m_χ^d at different stages d of the sequential discounting. We observe a rapid increase in Shannon entropy in the unnormalized case as mass is transferred away from the empty set as discounting progresses. This is of course the whole point of discounting.

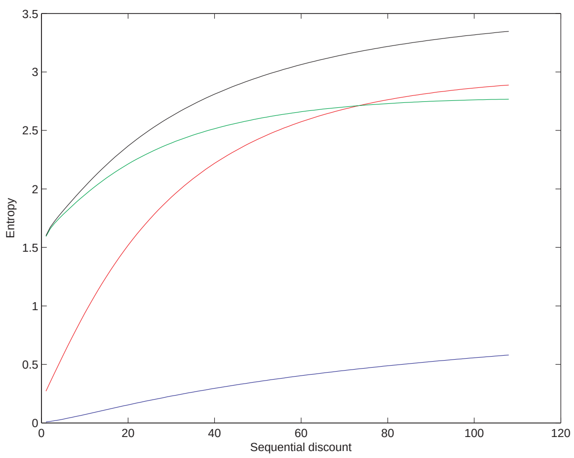

Figure 7. Entropy increases with discounting. Shannon; unnormalized (red). Shannon; normalized (green). Hartley; normalized (blue). Average total uncertainty; normalized (black).

More interesting is to observe the change in entropy for the normalized case (green line) as that excludes the empty set from the summation of scattering. Also, the Hartley information is only defined for normalized bbas.

Again, we observe a more moderate increase in Shannon's entropy as mass previously on the empty set $m_\chi^d(\varnothing)$ is scattered among the other subsets of the frame as the sequential discounting progresses, Figure 5. For Hartley's information measure (blue line) we observe a rather small increase in entropy as mass is transferred towards the frame as a whole $m_\chi^d(\Theta)$. As a consequence, the average total uncertainty $H(m_\chi^d) = G(m_\chi^d) + I(m_\chi^d)$ (black line) is mostly characterized by increasing scattering, and to a smaller degree by nonspecificity.

As is apparent from Figure 6 the loss of information by discounting does not make the analysis difficult. Rather it makes the conclusions that may be drawn from the combination of discounted belief functions more reliable, as the conflict is reduced. For instance, after 20 sequential discounts (see Figure 6) the preference order of supported focal elements becomes stable.

5 Conclusions

We have demonstrated that we can successfully manage the conflict of Dempster's rule by making well motivated and precise discounting of all belief functions. Such discounting is made individually for each belief function in proportion to its degree of falsity. We show that by performing the discounting process in a series of incremental steps we can reach any predefined acceptable level of conflict. In an experiment we find that this discounting does not normally make it more difficult to identify the most supported proposition. Rather it makes the selection process of the preferred proposition more robust when highly conflicting pieces of evidence are discounted down to a level they deserve.

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