

## *Exculpature Explained*

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Suppose you ask a friend about her recent hiking trip, and she says: “Well, the weather gods sure were kind to us!” You may wish she had chosen a less stodgy metaphor to make her point, but you know what she means to say: she’s had nice weather. In particular, you do not take what she said as evidence that she has turned into a maniac who believes that specialized divine entities control the weather. But why not? Just how did you convert her claim, which ostensibly describes the mood of the gods, into a message about the weather?

On the theory I have developed, this is explained in terms of the fact that, in the course of our ordinary linguistic practice, we routinely absolve our interlocutors of some of their commitments. This also explains why, when you say “the Chrysler Building is three and a half thousand miles from the Eiffel Tower”, it would be strange to reply: “No, you’re wrong! The distance is actually 3,632 miles.” That may be a correct response to the proposition you literally put forward, but it is a misunderstanding to take what you said all that literally. Normally, in making such a claim you can expect some of your literal commitments to be excused. This yields a loose interpretation of your words, to the effect that the Chrysler Building is *around* three and a half thousand miles from the Eiffel Tower. I call this kind of linguistic forgiveness *conversational exculpature*.

There are systematic limitations on what commitments can be forgiven. For instance, suppose I say “The Chrysler Building is 3,637 miles away from the Eiffel Tower”. This is very close to the true distance, and certainly much closer than the estimate of three and a half thousand miles. Nevertheless, here a strict reading of my words is forced, so that it *is* perfectly appropriate to reply “No, you’re wrong! It is only 3,632 miles”. Or suppose your friend had instead started her hiking story saying “Boreas, God of the North Wind, forgot to shave that week”. Here we cannot overlook the divine reference so easily, and no loose interpretation of her words is available. My theory aims to explain, in a formally precise way, which commitments can be forgiven in which contexts, and what message remains after those commitments have been subtracted.

Linguists and philosophers have long known that information is sometimes *added* to a claim’s literal content, embroiling the speaker in further commitments. This is called *conversational implicature*, a term invented by the British philosopher of language Paul Grice. For instance, the sentence “Some of the students got an A” can communicate the message that *Some but not all students got an A*. This is the result of adding to the statement’s literal content the implicated message that *Some students did not get an A*. Conversational exculpature may be thought of as the reverse of implicature: it is a process whereby information is *subtracted* from the literal content to produce the speaker’s overall message.

The main reason that this simple idea has so far received little attention, is that we cannot use it unless we first make sense of the notion of “subtracting” content. Content addition, or conjunction, is pretty well understood. But what is it to subtract one piece of information from another? How does one compute the remainder? How is it determined what is left of the weather gods remark after its protagonists have been removed? Until quite recently, there was a broad consensus that those conceptual problems had no solution, and that the idea of information subtraction could not play a load bearing role in our linguistic theorizing. But more recently, the debate has been reopened thanks to the groundbreaking work of MIT philosopher Stephen Yablo, who articulated a novel and hands-on approach to the issue.

However, Yablo’s account of subtraction has not cleared the fog around the topic altogether. His approach is bound up with a revisionary, complex proposal for a new, non-compositional

kind of semantics that represents a radical departure from mainstream linguistics. By contrast, my theory provides a far more straightforward understanding of pragmatic content subtraction. It builds on entrenched, standard linguistic notions and is continuous with existing work in the branch of linguistics known as formal pragmatics (like Roberts 1996, Simons 2002, Križ 2016).

A distinctive feature of my approach is that content subtraction is viewed as a means of making what the speaker says directly relevant. Essentially, it is a correction mechanism that comes into action when the speaker says something that, taken literally, is not wholly relevant in the context. For example, your friend's remark about the gods is not literally relevant to the topic of her hiking trip. And in a context where we only want to know the distance to the nearest 500 miles, the strict, literal content of "The Chrysler Building is three and a half thousand miles from the Eiffel Tower" is not wholly relevant because it specifies the distance to a greater degree of precision than the interests of the conversational participants require. Exculpature repairs such discrepancies. The resulting theory captures a disparate set of linguistic phenomena, including "loose talk", certain kinds of metaphor, and so-called "rigid" uses of definite descriptions.

In addition, the theory throws new light on a number of old philosophical puzzles. Let me mention just one. Philosophers have for a long time been interested in the question whether or not fictional entities are real. On the one hand, the question "What street did Sherlock Holmes live on?" appears to have a correct answer, namely that he lived on Baker Street. It also seems we can speak truly when we say that "Ellen is wearing the kind of hat Sherlock Holmes always wore." However, the literal truth of both claims requires that Holmes exists, and it seems plain as day that Holmes does not really exist: he is just made up. Alexius Meinong concluded that Holmes has a special kind of being, "subsistence", falling short of full existence. Bertrand Russell famously complained that this half-hearted metaphysical move conflicts with a "robust sense of reality", and insisted that everything there is exists. Accordingly, Russell denied that the true-seeming claims I mentioned really were true.

The theory of exculpature allows us to side with Russell in an interesting new way. Russell was right that these claims about Holmes are literally false. However, Meinong was also right to point out that they have true readings. They may convey truths about e.g. the content of the Conan Doyle novels or the make of Ellen's hat. But we can now explain the presence of those true readings as resulting from the exculpature of their literal commitment to Holmes. And the non-literal readings that result from these exculpatures do not entail that Holmes exists (or even that he "subsists"). Similarly, what your friend literally said entails that there are weather gods. But all she meant to convey was that the weather was nice, which entails no such thing.

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