Mendel Keller

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# Information After Exculpation

It turns out that when communicating, there is often information conveyed despite it not being directly spoken by the speaker. This kind of thing is so prevalent that all language speakers will know it. On the other hand, the philosophy of language tends to be rigid and unyielding, allowing a sentence to mean only that which it is understood to communicate following some strict set of rules. Here I propose a mechanism for a more robust theory of communication, one obtained from exculpated content.

First I will introduce the notion of exculpature, then explain a bit of its formal setting. Once we have that theory in place I will talk about the prevalence of exculpature and thus the prevalence of extra information conveyed in common speech. I will then explain how the discarded background assumptions of an exculpature manage to convey some information about speaker attitudes. After that I will contend with some issues and work out some kinks of my theory.

## Exculpature

*Exculpature* (Hoek) is a mechanism allowing for nonliteral interpretations. What exculpature does, informally speaking, is disregard the question of literal truth of a background assumption, and then interpret the sentence in accordance to its actual subject matter. A great example of exculpature is provided by:

(1) Ellen wore the same type of hat as Sherlock Holmes. (Hoek 2)

Here the subject matter is Ellen's hat. The background assumption is that Sherlock Holmes wore a hat. A listener is however expected to understand (1) as saying that Ellen wore a deerstalker. Any listener is able to ascertain the meaning of (1) to be that Ellen wore a deerstalker, even though the background assumption that Sherlock Holmes wore a hat is indeed false.

This is the general formula for exculpature. More examples can be found in Hoek. In all of them, exculpature works by interpreting a spoken sentence while being ambivalent about some auxiliary claim contained within. What ends up happening is that a listener understands the speaker's intended point as if the auxiliary claim were true, but in a way that doesn't rely on the auxiliary claim actually being true at all.

## Subtraction

The thing that exculpature is accomplishing is a sort of subtraction. A speaker says a sentence A with some part B, and we look for some sort of A-B, that is, A minus B. Here we understand what is communicated by A without necessarily agreeing to the commitment made by B. In (1) we have A being (1) itself, and B being "Sherlock Holmes wore a hat" so that A-B should be "Ellen wore a deerstalker".

It can be seen by some simple investigation that this subtraction is not a simple subtraction, and we do in fact need some part of B still. For example, something naïve like A and not B would be impossible in (1), since that would imply that Sherlock Holmes both did and did not wear a hat. This also wouldn't at all equate to "Ellen wore a deerstalker", at best it would evaluate to something roughly like "Ellen wore a #$%&?? hat". We can see from this example

that exculpature is going to need a somewhat more involved formalism than a simple subtraction. What is being sought is more along the lines of A without commitment to B, and not anything like A but not B.

## Formalism

It is worthwhile to here explain the formal setting for exculpature, under a possible worlds model of semantics. The first thing to introduce is **subject matter**. This will be the thing the sentence in question is aiming to talk about, for example in (1) the subject matter is Ellen's hat. The formalism for a subject matter is a partition of possible world space into sectors where Ellen is wearing a specific type of hat. That is, the partition on possible worlds defined by v ~ w if and only if Ellen wears the same hat at v and w. What this does is reduce the question of which world one is in to the question of which hat Ellen is wearing, since for the purposes of the sentence in question that is all the speaker is aiming at distinguishing.

The point of this type of partitioning is in order to focus on a specific part of a sentence. For example, when considering some conjunction, like "Mary wore yellow shirt and pants" we can consider separately that part which concerns itself with the shirt and that part which concerns itself with pants. In order for example to consider the shirt part, we simply look at the partition which retains the way things are Mary's shirt-wise, and varies in all other respects. That is, instead of individual worlds, we do analysis modulo the partition yielded by Mary's shirt. This allows us to understand language using the filter of that which we are currently concerned with. For example, it allows us to work in a world where philosophical problems are all solved, besides for the problem one is currently occupied with.

The next thing we do in exculpature is reduce to where the **background assumption** holds. The background assumptions of a speaker are those facts they rely on to convey their point. Essentially, these are like the presuppositions for a sentence. So that in practicing exculpature we remove the question of whether the background assumption holds by temporarily answering it in the affirmative. This allows us to evaluate the intended sentence meaning only in virtue of the way things stand with respect to its subject matter, and not worry about whether the part of the sentence consisting of background assumptions holds or not.

The idea with exculpature is that we remove the question of whether the background assumption is true, and only consider the worlds in which it does in fact hold. We then extend the truth value of the sentence in question to be what value it takes on the subject matter. That is, the question of whether an exculpated sentence is true at a world is the question of whether the sentence is true in that subject matter region when restricting to worlds in which the background assumption is true. This is a way to relegate the meaning of the sentence to the thing with which the sentence is concerning itself.

## Misreference

There are many places to use exculpature. For example, the class of misspeaking provided by inaccurate reference. One classical example of misreference is given by

(2) That man holding a martini in the corner. (modified version of Donnellan 287)

When the man in the corner is actually holding some other drink. In this case a listener can understand to whom the speaker is referring, despite the reference failure of a literal reading. In (2), the subject matter is the man in the corner, and the disposable background assumption is

that the drink the fellow is holding is in fact a martini. A listener can understand the reference, even without agreeing that the drink in question is a martini. The point here is to draw attention to the man in the corner, the fact that the man is holding a martini is only incidental. In fact, being in the corner is also incidental in this case, it just happens to also be correct, and therefore doesn't require exculpature.

In other cases of misreference, the speaker is naturally understood as successfully referring to something other than the literal descriptor used. An interesting example is provided by considering the pair of sentences:

(3) "the king of England plays a merely ceremonial role"

(4) "the queen of England plays a merely ceremonial role"

In interpreting (3), we realize that England doesn't currently have a king. The sentence can still be made sense of however, when we understand "king" as referring not to an individual, but rather to the office. Thus (3) is understood as saying "the modern British monarchy plays a merely ceremonial role". In (4), however, we refer to a specific person, namely queen Elizabeth II.

It is clear that (3) can be understood in this way as an instance of exculpature. The spoken sentence is (3) itself. The exculpated background assumption is that the current monarch of England is a king. This provides a resulting reading under which a listener understands the statement as saying "the English monarch plays a merely ceremonial role". One thing to note, which we talk about more later on, is that the speaker of (3) seems to be under a misapprehension. Thus, in speaking (3) the speaker indicates not only an attitude about the role

of the modern British monarchy in politics, but also a misconception about who the British monarch is.

Consider now again sentence (4). Here "the queen of England" accurately refers to a specific person. In virtue of this specific and true reference, there is little more that is communicated. Saying that this specific queen's role is entirely ceremonial needn't commit the speaker to any similar claim about the office in general. Instead, the speaker is understood as saying something about a particular individual's role in British affairs. Note that ironically (3) will refer more directly to a future queen of England than (4)!

An interesting feature, however, is that the speaker in (4) can still be understood as saying the same thing as the speaker in (3). That is to say, we can imagine a conversation that goes as follows:

Jabari: The queen of England plays a merely ceremonial role.

Reese: Do you mean to say that the power and influence of the British monarchy has been in decline for some time now?

Jabari: No, I mean that queen Elizabeth II in particular has participated very little in politics.

We see here that even though (4) communicates about something specific, it can still be understood as communicating something more general. This comes to a certain type of ambiguity where we almost see a sentence exculpated from itself, or rather its subject matter broadened. We won't however be delving into the weeds of that kind of operation too much in this paper, but it is worth pointing out.

# Exculpature everywhere

It seems in fact that exculpature is in fact quite commonly used in conversation. If someone says something with some slight error in the way they expressed themselves, we perform an exculpature to understand their meaning, similar to the cases of misreference above. That is to say, we commonly understand what someone is saying even though they misspeak. We also understand sentences that refer to some element of fantasy, and naturally switch between levels of literal interpretation. These types of examples indicate that in fact exculpature is a constant invisible part of the framework of language interpretation. In particular, although exculpature is a bit technically involved and construed, in practice it turns out to be perfectly natural and in fact widespread.

One commonplace part of communicating that uses exculpature is restating a point. When one speaker says something, and another speaker paraphrases it, the paraphrasing is a form of exculpating the particular mode of expression from the actual content. One the one hand there is the communicated content, which is retained and conveyed under a restatement. On the other hand, the part that's discarded is the particular choices an original author made in expressing themselves. In this way a rephrasing grabs only the point that a speaker was making, and isn't committed to the wrapper it was put in.

This goes to show us that even in cases of proper speech there is a sort of exculpature performed. Even though the listener doesn't always restate what was said, when you listen and understand something you're typically capable of restating it in your own words, so that the interpretative process in general partakes in this same phenomenon. A listener will automatically

make a determination as to what parts of what the speaker says are essential and which are auxiliary.

## Post exculpature analysis

As far as the intended meaning of a sentence is concerned, we only need some statement that communicates in the right exculpated way about the subject matter. So that which background facts serve an intermediary role for the actually intended meaning is underdetermined by that intended meaning itself. That means that a speaker has some ability to choose what will serve as a background fact. This choice then ought to convey something all on its own, in a way vaguely reminiscent of implicature.

In general, any part of a sentence ought to convey something. So that the particular choice made by a speaker about some part of a sentence ought to be meaningful. This becomes particularly salient for exculpated sentences however, as the role of exculpated background facts is explicitly only a guide for the intended meaning. That is to say that an exculpated piece of a sentence is not taken to mean what it says, but instead services the intended meaning in an auxiliary role. If there are multiple choices for a background part, then insofar as the background part plays a merely formal role in guiding the intended meaning, there is no functional distinction between any of the possible choices, since they will act the same way with regards to the subject matter. This in turn makes a choice of background fact more significant in and of itself. The only thing a background fact can do as a particular choice is to communicate independently from the role it plays, since another choice plays the same role.

In this way, if there's some part of the sentence we're ignoring, then the speaker's choice to have said that part of the sentence in a specific way still conveys some information. This isn't the speaker's intended point, and therefore there can be some ambiguity in what can be gleaned from the speaker's choice. However, the speaker's having chosen a particular mode of expression conveys something to the listener, and this is the sort of extra information that gets conveyed by speaker choice. So that whenever some part of a sentence is incidental to the speaker's point, their choice to include that part is notable. The inclusion of some part is some fact independent of overall meaning, which can also be independently analyzed.

## Multipart communication

In order to motivate the post mortem that can be performed after exculpature, we ought to first peek more broadly at sentences with parts that convey something extra. Generally, when a sentence is spoken, it can have any amount of parts. It is possible to evaluate and process each part separately. This process isn't quite the normal way of parsing a sentence, where a listener focuses only on the relevant parts which convey speaker intent. Nevertheless, the different parts of a sentence do manage to convey different independent things. Consider for example

(5) Everyone has the right to celebrate their personal identity.

This is a sort of thing one might convey in conversation, in order to reaffirm certain types of personal rights. But this sentence is loaded, and has many different elements. The speaker's point might be to defend a certain person's expression of a choice they made in some way. Or perhaps it is instead in order to affirm a certain principle, an attitude that all of a certain type of expression is admissible. But part of the sentence conveys that there are these things called "rights" and

that they extend to celebrations. In addition, (5) has embedded a notion that rights ought in general to be universal. Another thing that (5) communicates is a principle roughly stating that personal choice can only be criticized on the basis of their effects on others.

As another example consider the sentence

(6) Neither Congress nor state legislatures have authorized the development of such a system.

Here the speaker is aiming at communicating that the system in question is not legally sound, because the proper authorities haven't given the appropriate go ahead. In doing so, the speaker also manages to communicate about the division of power in the US, where programs can be authorized either by federal or state entities.

We can appreciate in (6) the way that this extra information conveyed isn't quite a presupposition. The extra information we're discussing here is somewhat similar to a presupposition in that it is communicated alongside the sentence despite not being the sentence's central focus. It also shares with a presupposition being a fact that lends support to the sentence by taking part of the context the sentence lies within. One way in which it differs is that these parts of a sentence needn't participate in assumed common ground. Another distinction getting at the same thing is that these parts don't precede the sentence, and the sentence may very well be coherent without that part. This can be seen from (6) by considering the possible alternative "Congress didn't authorize the development of such a system". Here the speaker doesn't indicate towards the way federal and state governments work, but the same point is made. Thus it can be seen that these parts attached to a sentence aren't those things on

which the sentence relies to be said, as with presuppositions, but rather these are the things through which the sentence is expressed.

Similar to the above example, in general for an arbitrary sentence, there will be some parts which communicate about something other than what the speaker is aiming at. These will be more general facts surrounding the intended meaning, which form the framework for the particular fact the speaker is trying to communicate. These mostly will just be the parts of the sentence itself, which also can be understood on their own terms. In these general cases, it isn't necessarily clear how to work things out formally, even though it is clear that language does work this way. It is an analysis of this kind that we wish to perform on background facts in exculpature cases, where we can get a better handle of the formalism.

## Extra information

We can now ask what sort of information, if any, is communicated by the choice of background statement which gets exculpated. In general, it ought to convey something like the speaker's attitudes towards the background facts. In particular, if the choice of background fact is particularly odd it'll strike a listener as conveying something extra. This can be seen in the example:

(7) I'm pretty upset with your father right now.

If (7) is spoken between two siblings, the choice of "your father" as opposed to "daddy" or simply "our father" would strike a listener as somewhat odd. In fact, it will convey the speaker disowning their own personal relationship with their father. By instead opting for a formal impersonal sort of descriptor, the speaker negates their personal relationship. This falls in step with the sentence

itself, but conveys something beyond the simple literal meaning. The speaker's intended point is presumably to explain some attitude they're displaying towards their father, and it is justified with the fact that the speaker is upset with their father. The impersonal reference is definitely not necessary to convey that point, and strictly speaking (7) can be expressed without this extra tidbit. Thus, the impersonal choice of "your father" manages to communicate something extra, which is the disowning, a way of doubling down on being upset. Even though (7) isn't strictly speaking an example of exculpature, it is pretty illustrative of the relevant principle, which is how an auxiliary choice conveys its own meaning.

The idea is that if there are two different statements which convey the same fact using different background facts, then the choice of one indicates an attitude of the speaker towards these background facts. For example, in (1), if there were some other iconic fictional character that wore a deerstalker, then the choice of "Sherlock Holmes" demonstrates in some way that the speaker has more of an affinity for 221b baker street than they do for the other fictional narrative. In fact, referring to a deerstalker as "deerstalker" instead of "Sherlock Holmes hat" ought to convey that the speaker in question actually knows about stalking deer, or is a philosopher of language. Similarly, the speaker in (3) probably misspoke and said "king" for some particular reason. It may simply be that "king of England" feels more natural to the speaker for some reason. It may also be that the speaker has some particular misconception about the state of the modern English monarchy. Perhaps the speaker mistakenly thinks that prince Charles is in fact king. At any rate there is something to be gleaned from a part of the sentence which is beside the point. We can then do this in more generality, since as we've argued exculpature crops up

everywhere. In this way, whatever choices a speaker makes for a sentence will end up conveying speaker attitudes.

## I didn't say that

Here we start to run into a potential objection. Simply put, a speaker may deny having communicated anything beyond the intended point. Every sentence will have a single thing the speaker is trying to convey, and a speaker will generally only commit to having tried to communicate that content. Anything beyond that however, is something the speaker may freely deny having communicated. It seems then a challenge for our theory, which says that a listener can understand something beyond simply the intended main point of a sentence.

The idea however is that in learning extra information a listener is really parsing how the speaker came to recognize the communicated point. So that the listener isn't accusing the speaker of intending to communicate extra information, but rather of conceiving of the main body of information itself in a specific way. That is, if in explicating the extra information the speaker protests "I didn't say that!" a listener can reply with "while that's true, it's something you made use of to make your point". The speaker has used something to give context for the point that they did in fact make. The particular formulation the speaker chose reveals something extra about the speaker's state of mind, even though the speaker wasn't aiming to convey this information.

If stubborn, the speaker can actually still escape that kind of interpretation. The speaker can deny that which a listener gleans beyond literal content by claiming that a certain formulation was for the listener's benefit and not indicative of the speaker's own conceptions. Or the speaker

can in some other way claim authorial authority to deny a listener's inference. Nevertheless, it remains that there is extra information to be gleaned. It simply turns out that this is information which the speaker is capable of denying responsibility for. For example, in the case where the speaker indeed makes some choice for listener benefit there is in fact something to be gleaned about that choice, but not the same kind of thing that is typically learned about that kind of choice. This is a speaker's privilege of having the authority to after the fact interpret what the extra information conveyed alongside their primary point is. A speaker gets to modify auxiliary facts in this way by claiming to have made a certain specific linguistic choice for a certain specific reason, not necessarily the same as a reason attributed by a listener.

In other words, after understanding what a speaker has said, a listener can then parse how the speaker came to think it. The way this is done is considering the choices the speaker made when some other choice was available to convey the same overall meaning in a different manner. This yields insight into the speaker's underlying state of mind, because that is what's left over after the fact the speaker is aiming at is understood. In this way the understood content is the essential part of the communication, but the listener still utilizes the auxiliary facts to make judgements about the speaker's state of mind. Nevertheless, a speaker will always retain the ability to weigh in authoritatively on the interpretation of these auxiliary facts.

## Hiding behind the facts

There is still a central issue we have left unaddressed, namely the special exception made for accurate statements. The way we have been going about all this is to look at exculpature, which is a sentence that can't be made sense of in a conventional way, and look at the

background facts therein. But what is so unique about a sentence that can't be made traditional sense of, so that we would learn extra things from its parts? It seems that no matter what is said, a speaker ought to be committed to some broader claim, and to some more general notion. Why is it that when speaking a literally true and precise sentence we don't take these same flights of fancy in interpretation?

One way to make a distinction for an accurate statement is by looking at the interpretive process. A way to model parsing a sentence is that the listener starts with an attempt to parse a sentence as concrete and literal. In the cases where the attempt to do so fails, the listener loosens their interpretation to allow for a more metaphorical reading. This is done up until the point where some reasonable interpretation is found. At any rate, the listener, in giving a generous interpretation, only assumes metaphor or some other type of less concrete interpretation when it is called for. This in turn yields that the less esoteric a sentence is, the less the listener ends up working to parse it. In turn, the listener doesn't quite ask what the parts are contributing, and so doesn't end up asking what the choice to include a part conveys.

Another related perspective on what's happening stems from speaker responsibility to be accurate. That is to say, there ought to be something in virtue of which the listener can make sense of what was said. Here the easiest thing for the speaker to rely on is a simple literal fact. If a part of the world corresponds directly to what was said, then the speaker in expressing that fact manages to refer to part of the world. At that point the speaker's job is done, and what was said is clear. Meaning that if a speaker successfully referred to a part of the world, they are no longer responsible for what they said, and the fact speaks for itself. It is sort of as if the speaker simply gave the listener directions for finding the fact. However, if the speaker is referring to

something more abstract or metaphorical, then the speaker also needs for the metaphor or abstract entity to be coherent and clear. This means the speaker is committed to a more complicated thing than a simple fact. In these cases, the manner of expression is a part of the conveyed information all on its own. In some sense what this is getting at is that in the presence of some fact in the world to which the speaker is referring, the real world fact is so salient that everything else that was said becomes simply background noise.

In this sense, we can think of the degree to which the listener can extrapolate as mirroring the inaccuracy in the actually spoken sentence. The less precise the speaker was, the more the sentence reveals about the speaker as opposed to revealing about the world. In this light, we can look again back at (3) and (4). In (4), the literal meaning obtains, and so nothing more is implied. In (3) however, since we don't have the literal meaning to fall back on, we can give the sentence a broader interpretation as referring to the office as opposed to the monarch.

## Advantages of our theory

So now I've laid out a theoretical framework within which it is coherent to understand a sentence as communicating something other than its intended point. At this point I can now introduce some of the advantages conferred by this theory.

The first distinct advantage is in allowing for a new kind of subtext. In general, language users will be familiar with the fact that there is more communicated in conversation than what is explicitly stated, so that theories which allow such subtext to be made sense of help bridge the gap between the formal theory and looser practice. In particular, our theory is open ended because it underdetermines what information gets conveyed by a speaker choice, and only

argues that there often is in fact some information to be gleaned. This sort of versatile approach can begin to account for a significant amount of actual language in practice.

Another domain in which this theory comes into play is reference. Our theory of extra information can be used to breath some new life into a Fregian theory of sense. That is to say we can distinguish the thing being referenced and the manner in which it is referenced. Since the sentence comes to mean the same thing with different descriptions of the same object being picked out, there is information to be gleaned from choice of manner of reference. This allows one to try to start building a theory of descriptive indexicals (see Nunberg) for example. More broadly this can justify thinking of a referent as being understood through the lens of the actually used reference, so that it is called into a sentence bearing a certain flavor.

In summary, some parts of a sentence will only be incidental to the speakers intended point. This turns out to be quite common in fact. These incidental bits convey something about the speaker's attitudes, so that a listener understands more in conversation than what was literally said.

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