

# Conversational Exculpature and Loose Talk

## Definitions:

A *partial proposition* is an ordered pair of sets of worlds, the first member of which is a subset of the second. The truth-value of the partial proposition  $\langle a, b \rangle$  is defined only at  $b$ -worlds.  $\langle a, b \rangle$  is true at  $w$  just in case  $w \in a$  and false at  $w$  just in case  $w \in b \setminus a$ . (The full proposition  $p$  and the partial proposition  $\langle p, \Omega \rangle$  are identified).

The *restriction* of the proposition  $p$  to the proposition  $q$ , written  $p \upharpoonright q$ , is the partial proposition  $\langle p \cap q, q \rangle$ .

A *question* or *subject matter* is a partition of logical space  $\Omega$ . Two worlds  $w$  and  $v$  agree about  $S$ , written  $w \sim_S v$ , just in case  $w$  and  $v$  are contained in the same partition cell of  $S$ . (Thus  $\sim_S$  is an equivalence relation on  $\Omega$ ).

A proposition  $p$  is *wholly about* (or simply *about*)  $S$  just in case  $p$  is a union of  $S$ -cells. (Equivalently,  $p$  is about  $S$  iff  $p$  is closed under the relation  $\sim_S$ ). A partial proposition is about  $S$  just in case it is a restriction of some full proposition about  $S$ .

A proposition  $p$  has *no bearing on*  $S$  just in case  $\top$  is the only proposition about  $S$  that  $p$  entails.

Let  $\langle a, b \rangle$  be a partial proposition and  $S$  be a subject matter such that  $\langle a, b \rangle$  is about  $S$ . Then the *completion* of  $\langle a, b \rangle$  by  $S$ , written  $S(\langle a, b \rangle)$ , is the following (partial) proposition:

$$S(\langle a, b \rangle) =_{\text{df}} \langle \{w : w \sim_S v \text{ for some } v \in a\}, \{w : w \sim_S v \text{ for some } v \in b\} \rangle$$

## Conversational Exculpature

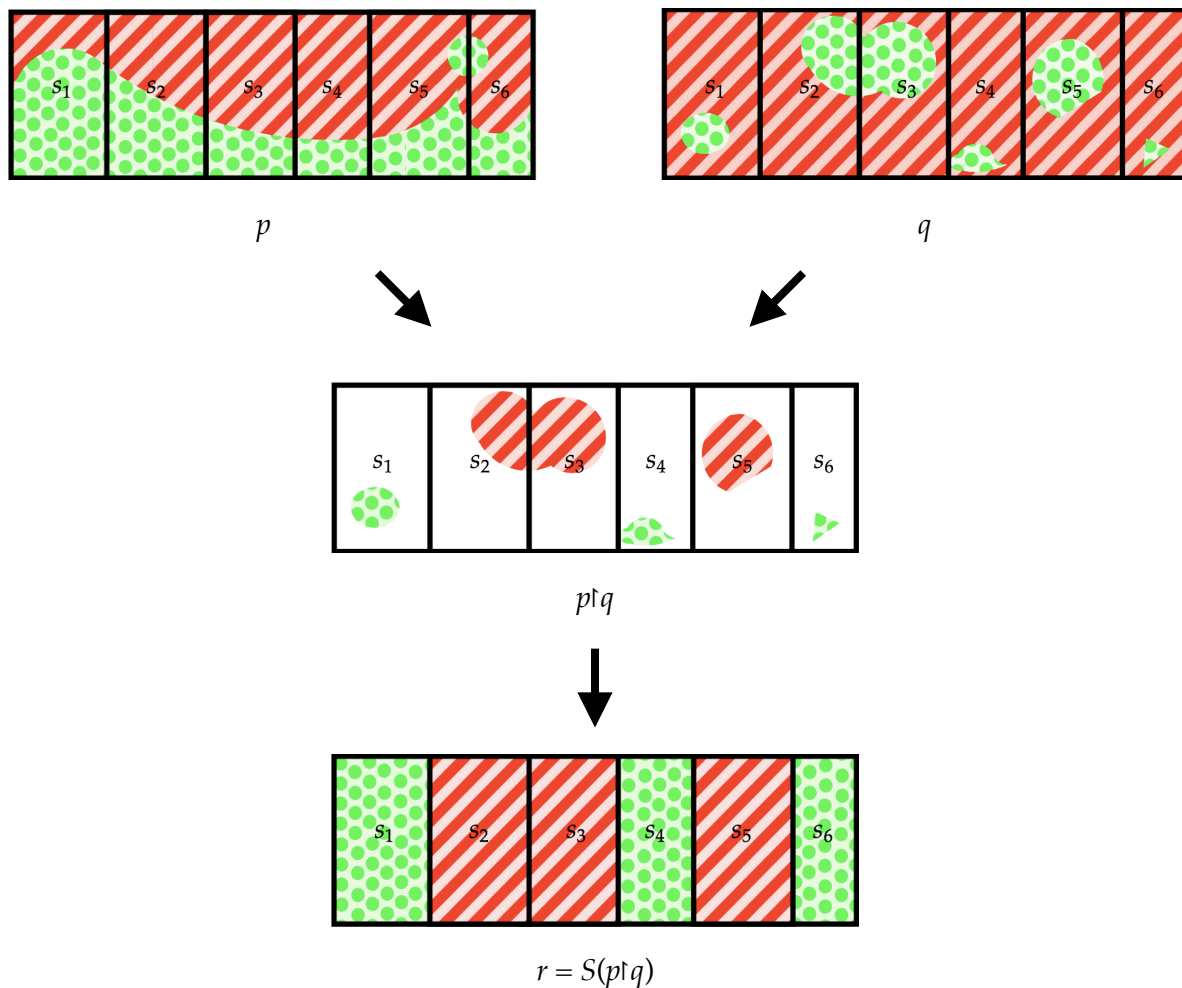
Suppose in a conversation with the question  $S$  as its QUD, the speaker makes an assertion with  $p$  as its literal content, while contextually presupposing  $q$ . Then whenever the proposition  $S(p \upharpoonright q)$  is well-defined, it is available as a non-literal reading of the speaker's claim.

Let  $p$ ,  $r$  and  $q$  be full propositions, and let  $S$  be a subject matter. Then we have  $r = S(p \upharpoonright q)$  if and only if the following three conditions are met:

- ▶  $r$  is about  $S$ . (Aboutness)
- ▶  $p \upharpoonright q = r \upharpoonright q$ . (Equivalence)
- ▶  $q$  has no bearing on  $S$ . (Independence)

In case only the final condition fails,  $S(p \upharpoonright q) = r \upharpoonright s$ , where  $s$  is the strongest proposition  $q$  entails about  $S$ .

## Diagrams



The thick black lines in each diagram represent the boundary lines between the various cells of the QUD. The polkadots represent worlds at which the relevant proposition is true, the stripes represent worlds at which it is false.

Conversational exculpature is a pragmatic transformation taking the literal, irrelevant content  $p$  of a proposition to the intended, relevant message  $r$ . This intended message is computed on the basis of  $p$ , and two contextual clues: a contextual presupposition  $q$  and the question under discussion  $S$ . First we take the restriction of  $p$  by  $q$ ; provided the resulting partial proposition is about  $S$ , we can then use  $S$  to complete it to the proposition  $S(p \upharpoonright q)$ .

## Examples:

(In all these examples,  $S_i$  is (part of) the discourse question of the conversation or text in which the example sentence occurs. Proposition  $p_i$  is the (purported) literal content of the sentence of interest. Proposition  $q_i$  is the contextual presupposition against which the utterance is to be interpreted. Proposition  $r_i$  is the proposition that ends up being communicated. In all cases, we have  $S_i(p_i \uparrow q_i) = r_i$ .)

### 1. "Rob is six feet tall"

$p_1$ : Rob is six feet tall

$q_1$ : Rob is some exact, integer number of inches tall.

$S_1$ : Rob's height to the nearest inch

$r_1$ : Rob is between 5'11.5" and 6'0.5" tall

### 2. "Ellen owns a hat of the same model as the one Sherlock Holmes always wears."

$p_2$ : Ellen owns a hat of the same model as the one Sherlock Holmes always wears.

$q_2$ : Holmes always wears a deerstalker.

$S_2$ : Ellen's hat collection (or to be precise, which hats Ellen owns and what model they are)

$r_2$ : Ellen owns a deerstalker.

### 3. "The man over there with the martini is a notorious jewel thief." (Donnellan 1966)

$p_3$ : There's one man there who drinks a martini and he's a notorious jewel thief.

$q_3$ : There's one man there who drinks a martini and it's *that* guy.

$S_3$ : What is *that* guy's job?

$r_3$ : *That* guy is a notorious jewel thief.

### 4. "Hob believes a witch burnt down his barn. Nob believes she blighted his mare." (Geach 1962)

$p_4$ : Nob believes she<sub>x</sub> blighted his mare.

$q_4$ : Hob knows a witch<sub>x</sub> burnt down his barn.

$S_4$ : What happened according to Hob and Nob.

$r_4$ : Nob's beliefs are as they would be if Hob knew a witch<sub>x</sub> burned his barn, and Nob believed she<sub>x</sub> blighted his mare.

5. “Crotone is on the arch of the Italian boot.” (Walton 1993)

$p_5$ : Crotone is on the arch of the Italian boot

$q_5$ : The region separating the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian Sea, which is in actual fact the locus of the landmass of Italy, is instead occupied by an Italian boot of vast proportions, perhaps left there by an absent-minded titan in primeval times.

$S_5$ : Italian geography

$r_5$ : Crotone is in [thus-and-such geographical region]

6. “There is no more beer!”

$p_6$ : There is no more beer in the universe.

$q_6$ : All the beer in the universe is in the fridge.

$S_6$ : The contents of the fridge

$r_6$ : There is no more beer in the fridge

## References

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