

NOTES ON

HEARER PRESUPPOSITIONS AND THE ART OF LANGUAGE BASED PROFILING

Section 2

Hearer Understandings and Presuppositions

1. HEARER UNDERSTANDINGS OF CONTEXTS AND UTTERANCES

1.1. Context. The *context in which an utterance is generated* is the verbal and situational environment in which the speaker generates that utterance.¹ Context characterized in this way is meant as an objective and publicly ascertainable circumstance in which an utterance is made.

1.2. Hearer Understanding of a Context. We distinguish a context from the hearer's understanding that context. A *hearer's understanding of a context* in which an utterance is made is the hearer's *perception of that context* which may differ substantially from the context as an objective and publicly ascertainable circumstance in which that utterance is made, and differ as well from other individuals' perception of that same circumstance. (As, for example, two individuals' witnessing the same accident or observing the demeanor of an individual involved in it may well have different accounts of both the accident and of that individual.) *We distinguish an understanding of a context C from C by affixing an asterisk (*) to C, yielding C*.*

1.3. Hearer Understanding of an Utterance. In a wholly analogous way, we distinguish an utterance from the hearer's understanding that utterance². We recall from Section 1 that an utterance is a unit of generated text. An utterance characterized in this way is meant as an objective and publicly ascertainable entity which is heard or read. An *understanding of an utterance*, on the other hand, is a *perception* of that utterance, which may or may not be similar to other individuals' perceptions of the same utterance. (As, for example, two individuals' reading of the same news article may well have different accounts of it, i.e., have different understandings of its meaning and implications.) *We distinguish an understanding of an utterance U from U by affixing an asterisk (*) to U, yielding U*.*

1.4. Consistency of Understandings. It is fairly clear that a *hearer's understanding U* of an utterance U* is dependent on his understanding C* of the context C in which that utterance is made. Accordingly, we speak of a hearer's understanding of an utterance as *relative to* his understanding of the context in which it is made. Moreover, a hearer will tend to understand an utterance and a context in such a way as would render that utterance *consistent* with that context, in the sense that that utterance would be likely to be judged as an *appropriate* one to make in that context by most language users who understood that utterance and that context in that way. If a way of understanding a given utterance failed to be consistent (i.e., was inconsistent) with an understanding of the context in which it was made, a hearer would tend to alter his understanding of that utterance and/or of that context to render that utterance consistent with that context relative to those understandings. The way that such alterations are shaped is discussed in Section 4.

2. UTTERANCE FEATURES (UFs) AND HEARER PRESUPPOSITIONS (HPs)

2.1. Utterance Features (UFs). An utterance feature (UF) is a property of a hearer's understanding U* of an utterance U which the hearer perceives to hold of U* relative to his understanding C* of the context C in which U is made. An utterance feature (UF) which is a property of a hearer's understanding U* of an utterance U is said to be an *utterance feature of U**

2.2. Hearer Presuppositions (HPs). Let U^* and C^* be as characterized in 2.1. Then we define *hearer presuppositions (HPs) associated with U^* relative to C^** as those of the speaker's beliefs and/or intentions which the hearer hypothesizes have inclined the speaker to utter U , understood by the hearer as U^* , in the context C , understood by the hearer as C^* . *In other words, a hearer presupposition associated with U^* and C^* is an hypothesis made by the hearer regarding those of the speaker's beliefs and/or intentions which may have inclined the speaker to make the utterance U in the context C as both are understood by the hearer.*

2.3. Example A. Consider a context C to be a restaurant counter at which the speaker is seated next to the hearer and facing forward (rather than toward the hearer). Suppose that the hearer's understanding C^* of the context C includes also the circumstance that the hearer neither knows nor has any prior knowledge or current awareness of any aspect of the speaker. Let the speaker's utterance U issued in the context C be the word³ "help," and suppose that the hearer (not surprisingly) understands U as a request U^* by the speaker for assistance of some kind (rather than, say, understood by the hearer as an unintended vocalization of some thought in the speaker's mind). Suppose further that the word "help" was uttered as a "whisper," an utterance feature UF of U^* relative to C^* . In this case "whispers" is a property of the hearer's understanding U^* of that utterance U relative to C^* , from which the hearer can draw the presupposition, regarding the speaker's underlying beliefs and intentions in uttering U in the context C , as expressing an urgent request for assistance by the speaker which he did not want everyone to hear (an understanding of U which the hearer would perhaps not have normally drawn without that UF).

2.4. Example B. Consider a situation where a speaker (S) makes an utterance U , "your name," uttered with the UF "rising pitch," and addressed to a hearer (H) in the context C of a party being hosted by S , which H understands as a party (C^*) to which he (H) has been invited, and who understands the utterance U as a question U^* (by virtue of the UF "rising pitch"). In this situation H might well assume (i.e., adopt the hearer presupposition (HP)) that the speaker did not believe that H had been properly invited, and that this belief had inclined S to make the utterance U to H in the manner (UF).

3. SOME VARIANTS OF EXAMPLE A³

3.1. Variant 1 of Example A. Changing the UF of Example A, while keeping U, C, and the understandings U* and C* of U and C as in Example A. Accordingly, suppose that we change the UF in Example A from “*whispered*” to “*shouted*,” which would induce a corresponding change in the hearer’s understanding U* of U, from which the hearer might adopt a different HP to associate with the production of that same utterance U in the same context C, such as that *the speaker was experiencing some acute physical emergency (such as a heart attack or breathing constriction), with the intent that everyone in the restaurant could hear and possibly assist him.*

3.2. Variant 2 of Example A. Changing the context C, the hearer’s understanding C* of C and the understanding U* of U, while keeping U and UF as in Example A. Accordingly, suppose we change the context C in which U is produced as a platform on which a lone figure stands, understood as C*, that is, as a stage on which the speaker is (perceived by the hearer as) an actor, who utters “Help” with the same UF as in Example A, namely, “whispered.” One possible HP associated with C*, U*, and UF, as described, might be that *the speaker is reciting - to himself - lines from a play.*

3.3. Variant 3 of Example A. Changing the hearer’s understanding C* of the same context C as used in Variant 2, changing the hearer’s understanding of the context C as a work area C* in which the figure is (perceived as) a workman, and retaining the same utterance U (“help”) but changing the UF to “muttering under his breath”, hence changing the hearer’s understanding U* of U as a private verbalization having no communicative intent. One possible HP associated with C*, U*, and UF, as described, might be that *the speaker – perceived as a workman - has injured himself in some way and is asking for help.*

3.5. Variant 4 of Example A. Changing the hearer’s understanding U* of the same utterance U while retaining both the hearer’s understanding C* of the context C and of the UF of Variant 1. Let U* be the hearer’s understanding of the utterance U, “Help,” as a word in a language he did not recognize. One possible HP associated with U*, C*, and *the UF* might be that *the speaker (mistakenly) believes that the hearer is familiar with the language she speaks.*

3.6. Variant 5 of Example A. Retaining the utterance U (“Help”) while changing the context C to one in which the speaker approaches the hearer carrying a wooden plank on which the word “help” (U) has been hand-painted in large letters (UF), and which is understood as a context (C*) in which the hearer feels that the speaker is walking uncomfortably close to him. A number of different possible HPs can be associated with U* and UF relative to C*: one such HP might be that *the speaker’s coming close to the hearer was only accidental and that neither the speaker nor his utterance had anything to do with the hearer; another HP might be the speaker is actually communicating a need for assistance from the hearer and almost stumbles over him in his zeal to get the hearer’s attention.*

4. TYPES OF LANGUAGE FEATURES (UFs)

The above example and variants involved a very simple one-word utterance and a limited range of UFs. For less restricted cases, a wider range of UFs would be considered. It is convenient to distinguish four types of UFs depending on the types of language features they involve, a selection of which is given in Appendix A. (Only two of the four types are exemplified in the above examples.) We give a brief description of the way UFs are classified below.

(1) *Formatting UFs.* UFs of this type concern the *graphic form of an utterance relative to the hearer’s understanding of that utterance and of the context in which it occurs.* If written, it includes considerations such as whether the utterance is typed or handwritten and if so, whether its characters, sentences, paragraphs, margins, and spacing, are well formed (cf. Example 6) and uniform, whether and what type of special linguistic and non-linguistic symbols it exhibits and, if a communication, whether it includes date, salutation, complimentary close, and signature. If oral, it includes considerations relating to uniformities in volume, pitch, tone, pronunciation, pauses, etc.

(2) *Stylistic UFs.* UFs of this type concern *the style in which an utterance is framed relative to the hearer’s understanding of that utterance and of the context in which it occurs,* and includes considerations such as how the speaker identifies, connects, and contrasts the relative significance of concepts

in terms of their affective intensity (cf. Examples 2,3,4,5), degree of focus (cf. Examples 2,3,4,5), digression, fixedness, perseveration, dispersion, generality, relativization, detail, negativism, and the like.

(3) *Thematic UFs*. UFs of this type concern *the structure of events and the mode of organization of their constituent entities referenced in an utterance, relative to the hearer's understanding of that utterance and of the context in which it occurs* and includes considerations pertaining to referenced entities as agents, actions, and targets, and their spatial and temporal connections in a medium.

(4) *Reasoning UFs*. UFs of this type concern *the structure of arguments expressed in an utterance, relative to the hearer's understanding of that utterance and of the context in which it occurs*, and includes considerations pertaining to the connections holding among expressions occurring in them regarded as premises and conclusions, the degree to which they are explicit or implied, plausible, relevant, or ambiguous, etc.

5. STEPS INVOLVED IN PROFILING PROCEDURE

5.1. UF Identification Step. The first step is a *UF Identification Step*, in which instances of UFs occurring in a given utterance U made in a context C are identified relative to the hearer's understanding U* of U and C* of C.

5.2. HP Identification Step. The second step is an *HP Identification Step*, in which hearer presuppositions (HPs) associated with each UF instance are identified, organized among themselves, and their implications drawn as they pertain to the interests of the profiler.

5.3. Profiling Step. The third and final step is the *Profiling Step*, in which the HPs and their implications from the preceding HP Identification Step are integrated to provide a profile of the speaker relative to the analyst's interest in a given application.

Footnote 1. A given utterance can have more than one verbal context, depending on how broad a text passage the hearer considers to comprise it, and can have more than one situational context, depending on the range of the external circumstances which the hearer considers as operant at the time in which that utterance is generated. If the hearer settles on particular verbal and situational context of an utterance, then both the verbal and situational components of that particular occurrence of that utterance can be regarded as fixed and we can speak of these components collectively as "the hearer's understanding of that context."

Footnote 2. We treat an utterance as *an instance, that is, as a "token"* of a linguistic "type," by which we mean (the usual thing) as that physical entity which a speaker produces or generates when he speaks or writes. We do not enter into the issue of the physical similarity that must hold between two utterances to be counted as instances of the same type, or of the relation between the notions of utterances and types, allowing that these notions, while problematic, have sufficient intuitive meaning to allow us to use the notion of utterance as a "token" of a "type" without too much confusion.

Footnote 3. In Example A and in these five variants we have used a single-word utterance, "Help," which does not allow as full a range of possible ways U* of understanding it, as would be possible for longer and more grammatically complex utterances which can be interpreted in many different ways.