

## NOTES ON

# HEARER PRESUPPOSITIONS AND THE ART OF LANGUAGE BASED PROFILING

## Section 6

### The Role of HPs in Humor

#### 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AND TWO EXAMPLES

##### 1.1. Introductory Remarks.

**1.1.1. HPs.** Recall that a hearer presupposition (HP) is an hypothesis made by a hearer regarding those beliefs and intentions of the speaker which the hearer believes might have inclined the speaker to make a particular utterance  $U$  in a particular context  $C$  relative to the hearer's understanding  $U^*$  of the utterance  $U$  and his understanding  $C^*$  of the context  $C$ . ( $U^*$  and  $C^*$  might not be the same as the speaker's understanding of  $U$  and  $C$ ).

**1.1.2. HPs as Mechanisms for Altered Understandings.** As remarked earlier (Section 3), understandings  $U^*$  of an utterance  $U$  and  $C^*$  of a context  $C$  are said to be *consistent* if most language users would tend to regard  $U$  to have been an appropriate utterance to make in the context  $C$  relative to those understandings of  $U$  and  $C$ ; if most language users would fail to regard  $U$  to have been an appropriate utterance to make in the context  $C$  relative to those understandings of  $U$  and  $C$ , then those understandings of  $U$  and  $C$  are said to be *inconsistent*. HPs provide a mechanism whereby the hearer can alter his understanding  $U^*$  of an utterance  $U$  to an altered understanding  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U$ , and/or alter his understanding  $C^*$  of a context  $C$  to an altered understanding

$C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C$  such that  $U^{*\wedge}$  and  $C^{*\wedge}$  are consistent. The operation of such a mechanism is illustrated below.

**1.1.3. Inducing Understandings by HPs.** A statement  $X$  *pragmatically implies* a statement  $Y$  relative to  $C^*$  if  $Y$  is likely to be true in most situations in which  $X$  is true. An HP *induces* an alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  relative to  $C^*$  if that HP in conjunction with  $U^*$  and  $C^*$  pragmatically implies  $U^{*\wedge}$ , and an HP induces an alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  if that HP in conjunction with  $C^*$  pragmatically implies  $C^{*\wedge}$ .

**1.1.4. Inconsistent Understandings.** We say that an understanding  $U^*$  of an utterance  $U$  is *inconsistent with* an understanding  $C^*$  of a context  $C$  if most language users who understood  $U$  as  $U^*$  and/or  $C$  as  $C^{*\wedge}$  would tend to regard  $U$  as an *inappropriate* utterance for the speaker to have made in the context  $C$ .

**1.1.5. Experience of Humor.** A hearer may experience humor in the perception that his understanding of an utterance is inconsistent with his understanding of the context in which that utterance was made and/or in resolving this perceived inconsistency by considering and comparing different HPs that would induce consistency. We illustrate how the experience of humor arises in some cases below.

**1.1.6. Regarding Some Previous Examples from Section 5.** The examples in Section 5 dealt only with HPs which induced alterations of a hearer's understanding  $U^*$  of an utterance  $U$ , and relative to a fixed understanding of the context  $C$ . In other words, we did not consider HPs which induced alterations of a hearer's understanding *of the context in which they are made*. Both types of alterations would be involved in a hearer's experience of humor, as we illustrate in this current Section 6, indicating the underlying mechanism.

## 2. Example. "Man Uttering 'Hello' to a Statue."

**2.1. The Scenario.** Consider a setting in which a man (the speaker  $S$ ) stands in front of a statue (the context  $C$ ) and utters "hello" (the utterance  $U$ ). The hearer's experience of humor in this situation begins with his understanding of the setting of the speaker's utterance  $U$  as a scenario within which *the hearer understands the utterance  $U$  as a greeting ( $U^*$ ) such as one human being might make to another with the expectation of a response from the other*, and understands the context  $C$  in which the utterance  $U$  is made as a context  $C^*$  in which the speaker makes the utterance  $U$  while standing before a statue in a park. The hearer may well regard his understanding  $U^*$

of the utterance  $U$  to be *inconsistent* with his (the hearer's) understanding  $C^*$  of the context  $C$  in which the utterance  $U$  was made, inasmuch as *the speaker's apparently intended recipient (the statue) is an inanimate object, hence incapable of receiving or responding to a greeting in the ordinary sense, (that is, not being rigged with electronic devices that receive and transmit verbal messages)*

**2.2. Hearer's Experience of Humor in This Scenario.** The hearer's experience of humor derives partly from his perception of the perceived inconsistency between  $U^*$  and  $C^*$  and partly from his subsequent attempts by the use of HPs to resolve it. The mechanism used to resolve the inconsistency is that of adopting one or another of various HPs regarding the speaker's beliefs and/or intentions in making the utterance  $U$ , understood as  $U^*$ , in the context  $C$ , understood as  $C^*$ , that is, by considering HPs which may *induce alterations of his (the speaker's) understanding  $U^*$  of  $U$  and/or of his understanding  $C^*$  of the context  $C$  which are consistent*. Such HPs would alter the hearer's understanding  $U^*$  of the utterance  $U$  to an understanding  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U$  and/or would alter the hearer's understanding  $C^*$  of the context in which the utterance  $U$  was made to an understanding  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C$ .

**2.3. Consistency and Inconsistency of Utterances Relative to Contexts.** The utterance  $U$ , understood as  $U^*$ , is consistent (inconsistent) relative to the context  $C$ , understood as  $C^*$ , if most language users would regard the speaker's making the utterance  $U$  as an appropriate (inappropriate) one to make in the context  $C$ . We express the condition that  $U$ , understood as  $U^*$ , is consistent (inconsistent) relative to the context  $C$ , understood as  $C^*$  by saying, more briefly, that  $U^*/C^*$  is consistent (inconsistent).

**2.4. Inconsistency of  $U^*/C^*$  in The "hello" Example:**

Let  $U$  be the speaker's utterance: "hello."

Let  $C$  be the context: The speaker's standing in front of a statue.

Let  $U/C$  be the connection between  $U$  and  $C$ : The speaker is uttering "hello" in front of a statue.

Let  $U^*$  be the speaker's utterance "hello" as a greeting.

Let  $C^*$  be the context: The speaker uttering "hello" in front of a statue.

Let  $U^*/C^*$  be the connection between  $U^*$  and  $C^*$ : The speaker is uttering "hello" in front of a statue as a greeting to that statue.

In the present example, with  $U$ ,  $C$ ,  $U^*$ ,  $C^*$ , and  $U^*/C^*$  having these meanings, we would say that  $U^*/C^*$  is *inconsistent* inasmuch as most language users would regard the speaker's making the utterance  $U$ , understood as a greeting  $U^*$ , as an inappropriate utterance to make in the context  $C$ , understood as  $C^*$ , that is, as a context in which the speaker utters "hello" in front of a statue as a greeting to the statue. Suitable HPs can induce alterations  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  and/or  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  which would be *consistent*, that is, such that  $U^{*\wedge}/C^*$ ,  $U^*/C^{*\wedge}$ , or  $U^{*\wedge}/C^{*\wedge}$  is consistent.

**2.5. Altered Understandings  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$ .** *Altering the hearer's understanding  $U^*$  relative to the hearer's understanding  $C^*$  of the context in which the utterance to an alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  relative to an alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  would be induced by an HP such as the following: (i) the HP, "the speaker believed that he was making the utterance  $U$  to a human" induces the following alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  and  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ : "the speaker mistakenly believed that the statue was a human"; (ii) the HP, "the man pretended that he was expecting a response to his greeting from the statue," induces the alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$ : "the man did not intend his utterance as a greeting,"; (iii) the HP, "the speaker uttered "hello" to what he knew was a statue for the amusement of someone else in the vicinity," induces the alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$ : "the man uttered "hello," not as a greeting but as a humorous act to be observed by others." (Note that the alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  in each of (i), (ii), and (iii) is consistent with  $C^*$*

**2.6. Altered Understandings  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ .** *Altering the hearer's understanding  $C^*$  of  $C$  as a context in which the speaker's apparently intended recipient (the statue) is an inanimate object, hence incapable of receiving or responding to a greeting ( $U^*$ ) to alterations  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  induced by any of various HPs: (iv) the HP, "the speaker believed that the statue was a street performer made up to look like a statue," induces the alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ : "the speaker was addressing a street performer made up to look like a statue" (an alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  with which the speaker's utterance  $U$ , understood as a greeting  $U^*$ , would be consistent); (v) the HP, "the speaker intended to address someone behind the statue" induces the alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ : "the speaker was addressing someone behind the statue rather than addressing the statue," (an alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  with which the speaker's utterance  $U$ , understood as a greeting  $U^*$ , would be consistent) (vi) the HP, "a recording device in the statue has played a message which the speaker heard" induces the alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ : "the speaker was responding to a message he heard emitted by the statue," (an alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$  with*

*which the speaker's utterance U, understood as a greeting U\*, would be consistent)*

**2.7. Summary.** The altered understanding  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ , in each of these instances (iv) – (vi), would be consistent with the hearer's understanding  $U^*$  of U, that is, in each of these instances (iv) – (vi),  $U^*/C^{*\wedge}$  would be consistent. Moreover, for each of the altered understandings  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  in the instances (i) – (iii) and for each of the altered understandings  $C^{*\wedge}$  of C in the instances (iv) – (vi),  $U^{*\wedge}/C^{*\wedge}$  would also be consistent, as would be  $U^{*\wedge}/C^*$ , for each of the hearer's altered understandings  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U^*$  and his understanding  $C^*$  of C.

**2.8. Experience of Humor.** The experience of humor in the hearer is realized by his alternating among possible HPs and considering the alterations in his understanding of the utterance and/or of the context which might resolve the felt inconsistency between them.

### **3. Example. “A woman is only a woman but a good cigar is a smoke.”**

**3.1. The Scenario.** Consider a setting C of a discussion group on the subject of spousal relationships, in which one of the discussants (the speaker S) utters, “A woman is only a woman but a good cigar is a smoke.” (the utterance U). The hearer's experience of humor in this situation begins with his understanding of the setting of the speaker's utterance U as a scenario within which *the hearer understands the utterance U as U\**: posing an intended contrast between a woman having no value beyond that of being a woman and a good cigar which has value beyond that of being a good cigar, namely that of being “a smoke,” and within the hearer understands the context in which this utterance is made as  $C^*$ : *a discussion group context in which only serious utterances were expected to be made, and relative to which the hearer regards his understanding U\* of the utterance U to be inconsistent.*

**3.2. Experience of Humor in This Scenario.** As in the above example, the hearer's experience of humor derives partly from his perception of this inconsistency and partly from his subsequent attempts by the use of HPs to resolve it. As in the above example, the mechanism used to resolve it is that

of adopting one or another of various HPs regarding the speaker's beliefs and/or intentions in the speaker's making the utterance U, understood as U\* by the hearer, in the context C, understood as C\* by the hearer, that is, by considering HPs which may *induce alterations of the hearer's understanding U\* of U and/or of his understanding C\* of the context C which are consistent*. Such HPs would alter the hearer's understanding U\* of the utterance U to an understanding U\*^ of U and/or would alter the hearer's understanding C\* of the context in which the utterance U was made to an understanding C\*^ of C. The hearer may experience humor as he attempts to resolve this apparent inconsistency by adopting one or more of various HPs regarding the speaker's beliefs and/or intentions in making that utterance in that context by altering the hearer's understanding of that utterance and/or of that context to render his understanding of the utterance *consistent* with his understanding of the context. Such an alteration would have the effect of rendering his understanding of the utterance *consistent* with his understanding of the context (in the sense of being appropriate to it). The mechanism used to resolve it is that of adopting one or another of various HPs regarding the speaker's beliefs and/or intentions in making the utterance U, understood as U\*, in the context C, understood as C\*, that is, by considering HPs which may *induce alterations of his understanding U\* of U and/or of his understanding C\* of the context C which are consistent*. Such HPs would alter the hearer's understanding U\* of the utterance U to an understanding U\*^ of U and/or would alter the hearer's understanding C\* of the context in which the utterance U was made to an understanding C\*^ of C.

**3.3. Altered Understandings U\*^ of U\*.** Alterations of the hearer's understanding of the utterance U\* could be induced by any of various HPs: (i) the HP, "the speaker's utterance was unintentional," induces the alteration U\*^ of U\*: "*the speaker had verbalized a passage from a Kipling poem without realizing he could be heard*"; (ii) the HP, "the speaker intended his utterance as humorous," induces the alteration U\*^ of U\*: "*the speaker believes that the comparison implied in the utterance U is so ridiculous as to be comical*"; (iii) the HP, "the speaker believes that a woman has less value than a good cigar," induces the alteration U\*^ of U\*: "*the speaker does not believe that women have value*"; (iv) the HP, "the speaker made this utterance to make the general point that women have less value than men," induces the alteration U\*^ of U\*: "*the speaker believes that women have less value than men*"; (v) the HP, "the speaker intended to be ironic in the sense of making an utterance whose real meaning is opposite to that which the

utterance appears to express” induces the alteration  $U^{*\wedge}$  of  $U$ : “*the speaker was ironically making the point that women have at least as much value as men.*”

**3.4. Altered Understandings  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ .** Altering the hearer’s understanding  $C^*$  of the context  $C$  as “a serious discussion group on spousal relations” to an altered context  $C^{*\wedge}$  (which may have a very different character than or identical with  $C^*$ ) could be induced by any of various HPs: (vi) the HP that “the discussion group, while serious, could appreciate a good joke to enliven its discussions” induces the alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ : “*the discussion was open to comic denigrations of women*”; (vii) the HP, “the discussion was on 19<sup>th</sup> century English writers such as Kipling (to whom this particular utterance is credited),” induces the alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ : “the discussion was on 19<sup>th</sup> century English writers such as Kipling (to whom this particular utterance is credited),” and (viii) the HP that “the discussion was on ironic expressions in literature,” induces the alteration  $C^{*\wedge}$  of  $C^*$ :

**3.5. Experience of Humor in The Hearer.** Humor in this case may be experienced by the hearer as he shifts between adopting one or another of the HPs (such as (i) – (v)) and/or one or another of the HPs ((vi) – (viii)) which have induced the speaker to make that utterance, and pairing them in a manner which renders them consistent (in the sense that most language users would find them appropriate who understood the utterance and/or the context in this way). Thus the experience of humor in the hearer is realized by his alternating among possible HPs and considering the alterations in his understanding of the utterance and/or of the context which they would induce.

## **4. Follow-Up Comments Regarding “This is not a joke” Scenario Discussed in Section 5.**

**4.1. The Utterance “This is not a joke” in a Threat Scenario.** We refer to the fuller account of the “This is not a joke” scenario given in the preceding Section 5, and apply it to a threat scenario. One often finds in written extortion threats an initial or near-initial sentence, “This is not a joke,” the intended meaning of which is apparently that the writer is serious and should be taken seriously. However, what can generally be presupposed in such a situation is that the threat is probably not a serious one inasmuch as this sentence is so

commonly used as to be considered by an analyst as “boiler –plate,” i.e., as an expression that is so highly conventionalized in movie scripts or other dramatizations that the writer is likely mimicking the phrasing from such sources. *In short, the use of such an expression, while literally signifying that the writer intends the threat as serious, the presupposition associated with it in a threat context is just the opposite, i.e., that it is not serious.*

**4.2. The Utterance “This is not a joke” in a Comedy Scenario.** (Partially revisited) As remarked in Section 5, a similar dynamic is often used in comedy routines, where a comedian, contrary to his explicit statement, indeed intends to “make a joke.” This intention is commonly expressed by other utterances which have the same function, such as “seriously,” and the like, uttered as the comedian introduces another “laugh line.” Such an utterance would ordinarily imply that what the comic would say next would be serious, hence would be a break from the comedic tone of his routine. If the comic’s audience is accustomed to his making disclaimers like this one followed by a joke in his routines, that audience would most likely expect that what would follow from this disclaimer would indeed be a “joke.” The preceding disclaimer only heightens that expectation by framing it. The audience would probably adopt the HP that what the comedian’s disclaimer states is not true, and that the comic actually intends that what he will say next will indeed be a joke, an HP which would induce the audience to understand that utterance as having a meaning opposite its customary one and so as consistent with the expected comedic context of the performer.

**4.3. Function of Context in a Comedy Scenario.** The comedian comes with a context C which includes a setting consisting of a speaker (the comedian), the speaker’s utterance U, and a context C in which the speaker makes that utterance. The hearer understands the context C as a situation C\* in which some sort of comedic action will take place, and who understands the utterance U as an utterance U\* which has comedic elements or implications relative to the hearer’s understanding of the context C as C\* (the scenario associated with this setting). If the comedian and his routines are well known, hence expected, almost anything that the comedian would say (such as U) at any point (not necessarily at the beginning) would tend to be understood (U\*) as a joke or as part of a joke relative to understanding the context C as C\*. Thus even if the comedian disowns what he is about to say as a joke, his claim to disowning it only heightens the expectation in his audience that it is fully intended as a joke and should be appreciated as such accordingly.



**4.4. Function of Context in a Threat Scenario.** We note that in the case of a communicated threat the speaker, like the comic in this example, comes also with a context consisting of an anonymous individual making a threat which is consistent with a "threat genre," and which carries with it the normal expectations in his recipient/victim consistent with this genre, as well as with the expectation that any threat beginning with "This is not a joke" is probably a hoax of some kind. Continuing with the analogy to the threat example, we have in the case of a comic, as we did in the case of the threat example, an utterance which expresses a content which is contrary to the content of the presupposition associated with it, in other words, a case where what is expressed is opposite of what one is presupposing. Having a statement and its presupposition at variance with each other is the basis of many comedy routines. In the same way, but to a different end, the analyst of a threat communication when coming upon an instance of a context-inconsistent presupposition needs to "back up" and try to get a broader perspective by determining whether the speaker is serious, i.e., if he (the analyst) can meaningfully assume that the speaker holds the beliefs comprised by the context-inconsistent presuppositions he generates and, if not, to see which particular ones need to be upgraded to "higher level" presuppositions, whereby the speaker's intent is to be reappraised.

**4.5. Speaker Awareness of Generated Presuppositions.** We note that unlike the joke situation above, the writer of a threat message need not be consciously aware of the presuppositions which the hearer might infer from his utterances (any more than any speaker normally would be), nor need he be consciously aware of the process the hearer may use in identifying them. Consider a case, on the other hand, where the speaker produces a context-inconsistent presupposition yet is conscious of what he is doing (e.g., using an irrelevant premise) in the sense that he (the speaker) is aware that the presupposition he has produced is context-inconsistent (such awareness, of course, does not entail that the speaker knows what a presupposition is, in any sense), yet the speaker does not intend that the hearer be aware that that presupposition is context-inconsistent, indeed, on the contrary, the speaker intends that the hearer accept the presupposition as being context-consistent. In this case, then, the initial context-inconsistent presupposition (to the effect, say, that one statement is relevant to another) is inappropriate (because the first statement is, in fact, irrelevant to the second) fails to give rise to the presupposition that the speaker believes that the initial context-inconsistent presupposition is context-consistent (since we have assumed he does not) and also fails to give rise to the presupposition that the speaker

believes that the hearer has picked up a secondary communication comprised by the presupposition he has drawn. Rather, the situation is this: the speaker believes that he has gotten the hearer to accept a context-inconsistent presupposition as context-consistent, that is, that he has deceived the hearer in the sense of getting him to believe something which the speaker does not himself believe to be true.

**4.6. Conversational Implicatures and Context Inconsistency.** In the “This is not a joke” scenario, the hearer is benignly led through conversational implicatures which ultimately are incompatible with reality by his (the hearer’s) own doing. We thus have a case here where the hearer extracts an initial context-inconsistent presupposition and tries to make sense of it by taking that HP chain that leads to the conversational implicature that the speaker is making a joke. Of course, on repeated tellings, the above steps are increasingly collapsed to the point that the "joke" is no longer funny, i.e., the hearer simply recognizes that the speaker is telling an "old" joke, which is no longer funny. We can go to a higher level 1 and 2 HP that the speaker is intending to tell an "old" joke, from which a variety of other possibilities follow.

**4.7. Conversational Implicatures and Hearer Experience of Humor.** We do not claim that all jokes have this structure, but it would appear that the resolution of an initial context-inconsistent presupposition into a conversational implicature has a significant role in many jokes. Indeed, conversational implicatures, by their very nature, are *extracted by the hearer in order to preserve a sense of his own participation in re-interpreting the speaker's utterance that produced the initial context-inconsistent presupposition*; and it is that act of re-interpretation which enables the hearer to experience the humor in the original utterance.

**4.8. Conversational Implicatures and Speaker Awareness.** We note that unlike the joke situation above we are not necessarily saying that the speaker need be consciously aware of the conversational implicatures that his utterances generate (any more than anyone normally is), nor need he be consciously aware of what the hearer may or may not do in extracting them but need only be aware of the speaker's general intentions along these lines.

## 5. A Different Type of Example: Abbot and Costello's "Who's On First" Routine

### 5.1. Two Sources of Humor in the "Who's on First" Routine.

As another kind of example, we consider the famous Abbott and Costello "Who's on First" comedy routine which can be separated into two parts: the first part is a non-comedic introduction to the comedic part of the routine which follows. We distinguish these two parts of the routine as "the introductory part" and the "comedic part." Corresponding to these two parts we can associate two types of HPs, one type are those HPs adopted by the hearer to render his understanding of the introductory part of the routine consistent with his understanding of the comedic part of the routine relative to his (the hearer's) understanding of the entire context of the routine; the other type of HP adopted by the hearer is to render the hearer's understanding of the utterances of each of the participants consistent with his (the hearer's) understanding of the utterances of the other relative to his (the hearer's) understanding of the entire context of the routine.

**5.2. First Source of Humor.** *The first source has to do with the HPs the hearer adopts to render the introductory interchange comprising a wholly non-comedic lead-in to the routine between the two men consistent with the highly comedic context comprised by the routine that follows their introductory interchange. (2) The second source has to do with the HPs the hearer adopts to render the utterances of each man consistent with the utterances of the other and gross miscommunication between two men consistent with the comedic context comprised by their routine and by the responses of the other.*

**5.3. First Source of Humor in the "Who's on First" Routine.** In the earlier described humor paradigms, the hearer experienced humor in hearing an utterance  $U$  made in a given context  $C$  by the interplay between those HPs which could render the hearer's understanding  $U^*$  of  $U$  consistent with the hearer's understanding  $C^*$  of  $C$ .

**5.4.** We recall that in the "This is not a joke" scenario, in analogy to the threat example discussed above, the comedian's remark expressed a content which was contrary to the content of the presupposition associated with it; in other words, that this was a case where *what was expressed by an utterance was at variance with what one was presupposing (the HP) relative to the context in*

*which that utterance was made.* As noted, having a statement and its presupposition at variance with each other is the basis of many comedy routines inasmuch as it induces the hearer to consider and choose among various alternative ways to resolve that variance.

**5.5.** This kind of variance is also a factor in the famous Abbott and Costello "Who's on First?" comedy routine, in which the *utterance* U is a non-comedic introductory interchange between Abbot and Costello regarding positions played by given ballplayers on a baseball team of which Abbott is to be a coach, and Costello an interested party, which the hearer/audience understands as a "set-up" U\* from which Abbott and Costello will carry out their comedy routine. The non-comedic introductory interchange (U) is as follows:

**Abbott:** Well Costello, I'm going to New York with you. You know, Bucky Harris, the Yank's manager gave me a job as coach for as long as you're on the team.

**Costello:** Look Abbott, if you're the coach, you must know all the players.

**Abbott:** Right, certainly do.

**Costello:** Well, I never met the guys, so you'll have to tell me their names, and then I'll know who's playing on the team.

The *context* C in which this exchange U occurs, is a stage on which Abbot and Costello stand at a microphone, which is understood by the hearer/audience to be the setting for an upcoming comedy routine C\* which the hearer/audience expects to follow the utterance U. Relative to C\*, the utterance U is understood as U\*, namely, as a set-up for the comedic part of the routine to follow, indeed one, as is usual in their comedic routines, Abbott will remain cool while Costello will persistently appear confused and discomforted.

The routine is carried out in a series of "turn taking" assertions alternately made by Abbott and Costello in which Costello persistently misunderstands Abbott's assertions and thus appears foolish, as expected.

So in this case, as in the "This is no joke" case, we have the introductory interchange U which – in and of itself – is neutral relative to comedic elements, but which – as an introduction to an Abbott and Costello routine – is understood as U\*, that is, as a set-up for a comedy routine relative to the hearer's understanding C\* of the context C in which that utterance U takes place. Thus, in this case, as in the "This is no joke" case, *what is expressed by an utterance (expressed by the introductory interchange) is at variance with –*

*i.e., is inconsistent with –the content of the HP the hearer makes regarding the comedic intent behind this neutral appearing introductory interchange U, which had no intrinsic portent of being a lead-in to a comedy routine.*

This type of inconsistency was illustrated earlier in the “This is not a joke” case, where a comedian initially asserts, “this is not a joke,” preparatory to making a “joke,” hence violating his disclaimer to the contrary, and yet in conformity with the hearer’s expectations that the comedian will next make a joke. And so here, in the Abbott and Costello routine, the set-up C\*, which carries no portent of discomforting Costello, is fully expected by the hearer/audience as being preparatory to discomforting him (rather than just conveying information to him – as implied in the set-up)).

Thus the hearer/audience adopts the HP that, indeed, something unfavorable to Costello will follow in the routine.

## **5.6. Second Source of Humor in the “Who’s on First” Routine.**

The comedic part of the routine itself has an interesting internal structure involving an HP of a different sort, namely an HP made by the hearer/audience to account for the discomforting of Costello in the routine.

There are situations regarding dialogues, discussions, or debates where multiple speakers and hearer are involved which require an extension of this paradigm in accounting for a hearer’s (i.e., audience’s) experience of humor.

We see this in the structure of the Abbott and Costello “Who’s on first” routine: *The hearer (i.e., the audience) adopts the HP that Abbott understands Costello’s utterances as declarative assertions and that Costello understands his and Abbott’s utterances as questions, the result of which is that each of the two men persist in repeating the utterances of the other rather than being responsive to them, the result being a communication impasse.*

*In more detail: the hearer/audience resolves the communication impasse by adopting an HP to the effect that Abbott understands his utterances  $U_A$  as full or fragmentary declarative assertions  $U_A^*$  and that Costello understands those same utterances  $U_A$  as questions  $U_C^*$ . The result is that each man repeats his utterance, Costello because he regards it as a question yet to be unanswered,*

*and Abbott because he regards Costello's utterance as its answer, which he reiterates.*

The hearer/audience experiences humor in: (i) undergoing the process of resolving the source of the communication impasse exhibited in the Abbott&Costello dialogue in terms of this HP, (ii) alternating between the differing understandings of the two men regarding the same utterances (iii) observing the prolonged incapacity of the two men to make this determination themselves, and (iv) surmising what sort of assumptions (HPs) each man might be adopting to account for the inclination of the other to respond to his utterances by simply repeating them.

*The source of the exhibited impasse lies in the audience's adopting a lower level HP; namely, that Abbott identifies the players to Costello by expressions not normally understood as proper names, such as the interrogative pronouns "who" and "what," (among others), and that Costello understands these expressions to have their customary meanings, i.e., as interrogatives, say, rather than as proper names.*

**There are 284 alternating utterances in this routine. The following is a selection of utterances 22 through 56, chosen to give the flavor of the routine as it pertains to the alternating meaning of "who," which Abbott understands as a proper name and which Costello understands as an interrogative. The numbers enclosed in brackets indicate the order in which utterances occur among the total 284 utterances in this routine.**

[22] **Costello:** Well then who is on first?

[23] **Abbott:** Yes.

[24] **Costello:** I mean the fellow's name.

[25] **Abbott:** Who.

[26] **Costello:** The guy on first.

[27] **Abbott:** Who.

[28] **Costello:** The first baseman.

[29] **Abbott:** Who!

[30] **Costello:** The guy playing first base.

[31] **Abbott:** Who is on first.

[32] **Abbott:** I say, Who's on first, What's on second, and I Don't Know's on third.

[33] **Costello:** Are you the manager?  
[34] **Abbott:** Yes.  
[35] **Costello:** You going to be the coach too?  
[36] **Abbott:** Yes.  
[37] **Costello:** And you don't know the fellow's names?  
[38] **Abbott:** Well I should.  
[39] **Costello:** Well then who is on first?  
[40] **Abbott:** Yes.  
[41] **Costello:** I mean the fellow's name.  
[42] **Abbott:** Who.  
[43] **Costello:** The guy on first.  
[44] **Abbott:** Who.  
[45] **Costello:** The first baseman.  
[46] **Abbott:** Who!  
[47] **Costello:** The guy playing first base.  
[48] **Abbott:** Who is on first.  
[49] **Costello:** I'm asking you who's on first!  
[50] **Abbott:** That's the man's name.  
[51] **Costello:** That's whose name?  
[52] **Abbott:** Yeah.  
[53] **Costello:** Well go ahead and tell me.  
[54] **Abbott:** That's it.  
[55] **Costello:** That's who?  
[56] **Abbott:** Yeah.

## **5.7. Theoretical Aspects of This Dialogue Analysis.**

**5.7.1.** In a conversational turn-taking interaction, the context of any given utterance includes the preceding utterances made by all participants in the interaction and the context in which each of these preceding utterances was made. And the presuppositions of a given utterance must be taken relative to that context. For example, if a person was to come in on a conversation which was already in progress, in order to fully access the presuppositions associated with the first utterance he heard as he came in on the interaction, he would need to be able to access the presuppositions associated with the utterances which had preceded it and, for this purpose, he would also be able to access the contexts in which they were respectively made. As an even more familiar example, if a person you were to come in on a movie after it had begun and were concerned to ideally understand it, he would have to

access to all the dialogue which had occurred in the segment you had missed, and to the contexts in which each utterance in that dialogue had occurred. We note in this regard that in a turn-taking interaction (such as would occur in a single dialogue in a movie), the context in which the successive utterances are produced changes with each utterance.

**5.7.2.** Similar considerations would hold in the case of a sequence of utterances (oral or written) made by one speaker, for even here the contexts in which the successive utterances are produced change with each utterance.

**5.7.3.** In a conversational turn-taking interaction, each participant alternates as speaker and hearer. And if an outside party (an audience) were privy to that interaction as well, that outside party becomes an additional hearer (i.e., a secondary hearer). Regarding the Abbott and Costello routine, both Abbott and Costello alternate as speakers and hearers, and the audience (and analyst) is the secondary hearer throughout.

**5.7.4.** Since the Abbott and Costello routine is carried out as a performance for the entertainment of an audience, the performance itself constitutes the overriding consideration for that audience in understanding the successive contexts in which the turn-taking utterances occur, and for that audience's association of presuppositions to each of those utterances.

**5.7.5.** The situation is similar to that noted above in the enactment of a comedic (Shakespearean) play where a succession of utterances are made by the characters in the play in a succession of contexts which they understand in different ways and associate different presuppositions with them. And, analogous to the situation enacted in the Abbott and Costello routine, the performance of the play constitutes a wider context for its audience relative to which it understands the successive utterances and the contexts in which they occur, and in the audience's association of presuppositions which determine those understandings. In other words, that wider context includes not only the succession of contexts the performers' understanding of which is assumed by the audience, but the presuppositions which the audience assumes the characters associate with the utterances those characters produce in them.