Are You Always This Stupid or Are You Making a Special Effort Today? : The Structure and Function of Conventional and Innovative Insulting Rhetorical Questions

Chaney Harter

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper will be to detail the inherent paradox that exists in trying to form an insulting rhetorical question (IRQ), and two separate syntactic and semantic methods which work to circumvent this paradox and produce felicitous insulting rhetorical questions. The paradox of insulting rhetorical questions is that the requirements for a successful rhetorical question and the requirements for a successful insult appear to be mutually exclusive. In order for a rhetorical question to be felicitous, both participants in the discourse must have an identical or similar answer to the rhetorical question stated, and this collaboration is necessary for the success of a rhetorical question (Ilie 1994). In order for an insult to be successful, however, there is necessarily a lack of collaboration between the insulter and the insultee (Neu 2008). This necessity of agreement in rhetorical questions and necessity of non-agreement in insults makes it appear at first as if insulting rhetorical questions would be impossible to form.

I will argue that there are two ways in which insulting rhetorical questions can be formed to overcome this paradox. The first is the use of presuppositions within an innovative structure in an IRQ. In these, the insulting material is presupposed, meaning that any canonical answer to the IRQ will contain the insult, thus forcing “agreement” between the insulter and the insultee in a formal semantic way and overcoming the paradox. The second is the use of conventional structures in IRQs, which are syntactic structures that force an insulting reading no matter what material is inserted into the structure, also overcoming the paradox. My conclusions in this paper will expand the research on insulting rhetorical questions and hopefully provide a clear and concise explanation of how these IRQs function semantically.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Brief Overview of Insulting Rhetorical Questions and Example

An insulting rhetorical question is a rhetorical question (discussed Section 2.4) which contains an insult (discussed in Section 2.2), as in (1)

(1) Are you always this stupid or are you making a special effort today?²

The syntax of (1) is that of a question, evident in the inversion of the verb and subject at the beginning of the clauses are you always this stupid and are you making a special effort today, and the fact that the entire utterance ends in a question mark (Basurkem 2011). However, the semantics of this rhetorical question are quite different from that of a regular question, in that the speaker is not actually interested in obtaining any information from the insultee. The rhetorical question is syntactically a question but semantically a statement (Rhode 2006: 135). The speaker of example (1) is insulting the addressee because he is presupposing that the addressee must either always be this stupid or is making a special effort to be stupid today (discussed in Section 5.5).

1.2 Paradox of Insulting Rhetorical Questions

The concept of insulting rhetorical questions is fascinating because it appears to present a paradox -- namely that the requirements for a felicitous rhetorical question appear to be at odds with that of a felicitous insult. By definition, in order for a rhetorical question to be felicitous, both participants in an exchange must agree upon an answer, or at least reach a similar conclusion (Rhode 2006:135). This means that if Speaker A were to use a rhetorical question directed at Speaker B, in order for this rhetorical question to be successful, both Speaker A and Speaker B must already agree upon a similar answer to that rhetorical question. For example, suppose Speaker A were to say (2) while outside with speaker B:

(2) Isn’t it hot outside?

This question would be rhetorical, because both Speaker A and Speaker B would both presumably already know and agree whether it is, in fact, hot outside (Han 2002:202, cited Lee-Goldman 2006:2).

However, the semantics of insults function in a manner that appears counter to that of rhetorical questions. When discussing the definition of insults, the fact that the insultee must not agree with the insulter is often mentioned, because an insult necessarily needs a gap between how the insulter views the insultee, and how the insultee views himself). As Neu concludes, the psychological effect of an insult is such that one comes to the abrupt conclusion that others think worse about oneself than one previously had known (2008: 34). This is because an insult is an utterance which expresses a negative view of a person or a group in an attempt to worsen their self-image (Conley 2010: 2). Although this is a way to define insults, the idea of lack of collaboration rather than lack of agreement is perhaps a better way to think about the issue in the context of this paper. There are insults used which the insultee would agree with. Suppose that the insult in (3) is used against someone who genuinely believes themselves to be fat.

(3) You’re so fat!

This type of insult can often be one of the most hurtful to the insultee, precisely because the insultee agrees with the insulter and feels that this flaw they possess is something to be ashamed of. What is demonstrated here is not a lack of agreement but a lack of collaboration between the insulter and the insultee. The insulter is deliberately using this statement in a non-collaborative, confrontational method which seems to be at odds with the collaboration inherent in the prior agreement between speakers when a rhetorical question is used. The exact difference between collaboration and agreement is out of the scope of this paper, but it is necessary to note that when
I discuss the paradox inherent in insulting rhetorical questions, I am referring to apparent incompatibility between the collaboration between speakers which is required by a rhetorical question and the non-collaboration which is required by an insult. In light of this definition and the existing definitions which talk about “agreement,” both the word “agreement” and the word “collaboration” will be used in this paper.

In light of these semantic differences between rhetorical questions and insults, it seems impossible at first that the two would be able to be combined successfully into a meaningful utterance which combines the features of both. However, as will be discussed below in section 1.3, I believe that the insulting material in at least specific types of insulting rhetorical questions (namely, ones with innovative structures, discussed in Section 6) is presupposed, and that this is a topic that needs to be explored in this thesis if we are to more fully understand insults, rhetorical questions, and presuppositions.

1.3 Hypothesis

My central purpose in this paper will be to present and defend the idea that the insulting material in an insulting rhetorical question with an innovative structure will necessarily be presupposed in order to be semantically meaningful. The idea of an insulting rhetorical question is possible because all of the possible, canonical answers will contain the insulting material, which therefore forces “agreement” between the insultee and the insulter. The idea of a canonical answer is discussed in section 2.2.

In contrast, the insulting material in an insulting rhetorical question with a conventional structure will not necessarily need to be presupposed, because the function of the conventional structure forces an insulting interpretation regardless of the content. The idea of “innovative” and “conventional” structures is based on Mateo and Yus’ (2013) concept of “innovative” and
“conventional” insulting material. Mateo and Yus argue that the insulting material within an insult (for example, the word *jerk* in the utterance *You’re such a jerk.*) can be either innovative or conventional. I will extend these concepts of “innovative” and “conventional” to include structures of the entire insulting rhetorical question. The idea of IRQs with innovative structure and the need for presuppositions in these types of IRQs is discussed in Section 6. The idea of IRQs with conventional structures is discussed in Section 7.

1.4 Road Map

In section 2, I will be focusing on defining terms and concepts which are crucial to understand and define fully before going into deeper analysis of the semantics of insulting rhetorical questions. In Section 3, I will explain the interaction of terms discussed in Section 2 (the concept of an “insulting rhetorical question,” for example, which combines the properties of “insult” and “rhetorical question”) in order to further narrow the focus of this paper. In Section 4, I will discuss the function of presuppositions in insulting rhetorical questions in general. In Section 5 I will present more specifically the different types of presuppositions possible in IRQs. In Section 6, I will present my theory that insulting rhetorical questions with innovative structure must have insulting material which is presupposed in order to be semantically felicitous, while in Section 7 I argue that insulting rhetorical questions with conventional structures do not need insulting material which is presupposed, because whatever material is put into a conventional structure will receive an insulting reading due to the structure alone. Both innovative and conventional structures circumvent the paradox of combining an insult with a rhetorical question in order to form an insulting rhetorical question. In Section 8, I will present my conclusions based on this paper.

2. CLARIFICATION OF TERMS
2.1 List of Terms to Be Clarified

In this section, I will define terms which are crucial to understanding the main ideas and scope of this paper: “question”; “rhetorical question”; “presupposition”; “insult”; “tag question”; and “canonical answer.” These definitions by no means exhaustively cover every aspect and dimension of the terms, but are sufficient for the purposes of this thesis.

2.2 Definitions of “Question” and “Canonical Answer”

Basurkem (2011) defines questions as “utterances inviting a response and that, when spoken, may have specific intonation patterns.” Basurkem goes on to define the four different types of questions in English: wh-questions, yes/no questions (also called “polar questions,” which require only yes or no as an answer), alternative questions, and tag questions (discussed in Section 2.6). These specific syntactic structures will be referred to throughout this paper.

However, in addition to understanding the syntactical structures of questions in general, one must also understand the semantics of questions. Charles Hamblin is widely considered to be one of the experts in this field, and in his 1958 and 1973 works, argues that the semantics of a question is the set of answers. For example, for the question

(4) John eats what?

the Hamblin set of answers would be the set of all valid answers to (3), as seen below:

(5) {John eats ham, John eats beans, John eats oranges...}

The semantics of question (4) is therefore the set of answers in (5). Pragmatically, the addressee is then supposed to choose which of the propositions presented in the Hamblin set the correct one is. There are three main types of questions of interest in this thesis: polar questions, wh-questions, and “or” alternative questions.
Polar questions are questions whose answer set contains two propositions. For the polar question in (6), the possible, “canonical” (a term discussed in section 2.2) answers are (7) and (8):

(6) Do you have a dog?

(7) Yes, I have a dog

(8) No, I don’t have a dog.

These canonical answers are derived from the Hamblin set of question (6), given in (9):

(9) \{I have a dog, I don’t have a dog\}

Wh-questions are those which contain a wh-word (who, what, where, when, why and how) and whose answer sets contain many propositions. The wh-question in (10) can be answered in many possible ways, including I’m crying because I’m sad, I’m crying because my dog just died and I’m crying because I just tripped and fell and it really hurt.

(10) Why are you crying?

Finally, “or” alternative question are similar to polar questions, in that they greatly restrict the types and numbers of propositions that can be found in the answer set. In question (11), there are only two possible canonical answers, (12) and (13).

(11) Do you want to go home or do you want to stay at the party?

(12) I want to go home.

(13) I want to stay at the party.

because the use of the word or in question (11) makes it so that one of only two possible answers (i.e. the options explicitly presented) can be true.

For the purposes of this paper, a question will therefore be defined as an utterance which invites a response, as stated by Basurkem. A question will denote its answer set, and the number
of felicitous answers in this answer set can be greatly restricted based on the syntactic structure of the question itself (a polar question, for example, has only two possible canonical answers, as seen in (12) and (13) above).

2.3 Definition of “Rhetorical Question”

Rhetorical questions have been analyzed in a variety of ways. It is commonly agreed that rhetorical questions do not, in fact, operate as ordinary questions at all. Ilie (1994) contrasts rhetorical questions with what she calls “conducive questions,” with ordinary questions, meant to elicit a verbal response, as in (6), (10), and (11).

Rhetorical questions, although they have the form of a conducive question, differ from these conducive questions because they are designed to elicit a mental response from the addressee, this response being the inference of an implicit answer (Ilie 1994: 94). For example, in (14), the implied answer (that John has never done anything to help) is supposed to be a mental response.

(14) What has John ever done to help?

This can be seen in the fact that rhetorical questions can often be used within the context of an extended statement without any pause for a possible response from the addressee, as in (15):

(15) What has John ever done to help? I mean, he’s lazy, he’s inconsiderate, and he acts like we should be waiting on him hand and foot while he lounges about!

In addition to responses which are pragmatically viable but not found in the Hamblin set, such as “I don’t know”, rhetorical questions often elicit responses not found in the Hamblin set, such as You suck!, which shows a covert understanding of the possible answers. This idea is discussed in Section 4.2 (Rhode 2006: 134-135) posits that, in order for a rhetorical question to be successful,
it must have the form of a question, but the force of an assertion, and both speakers in the exchange must arrive at a similar, if not identical, answer to the rhetorical question.

Rhetorical questions will therefore be defined as utterances with the form of a question, the force of an assertion, and whose answers are mental responses. The speaker of a rhetorical question must believe that all speakers in the discourse will agree upon a similar mental answer to the rhetorical question.

2.4 Definition of “Presupposition”

For statements, a presupposition is that part of a declarative which must be true in order for the declarative to have a truth-value. I will define presuppositions in questions as that part of an utterance that must be true for the question to have an answer (see Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984).

Cooper approaches the idea of presuppositions by critiquing the work of Bertrand Russell. Russell asserted that a sentence must either be true, false, or meaningless (Russell 1905: 14, cited in Cooper 1974: 9). Russell would view sentence (16) as false, because it is not meaningless in Russell’s opinion (one can derive the meaning of the sentence to be that there is a King of France, and that this individual is bald), but it is also not true (because in 1905 there was no King of France).

(16) The King of France is bald.

I agree with Cooper in his assessment that (16) is, however, neither false nor true, because the presupposition of the sentence (which Russell called an assertion) in (23’) is false, and the sentence therefore has no truth value.

(16’) There is a King of France.
Presuppositions in questions function differently than presuppositions in declaratives. Questions have no truth-value, and therefore the definition that if the presupposition is not true, then the utterance will have no truth-value does not hold for questions. Instead, a presupposition failing in an interrogative will result in the interrogative failing to have an answer, either true or false (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984). When “an interrogative has a certain presupposition, and is used in a certain situation in which this presupposition is false, the interrogative cannot be answered, and has to be rejected...this corresponds to an indicative sentence lacking a truth value” (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984: 31-32).

In addition, there are more specific presuppositions based on certain interrogative constructions, such as the existential presupposition associated with the word *who* (as in (17)), and the presupposition associated with the alternative question construction (as in (18)):

17) To whom is John married?

18) Do you want coffee or do you want tea?

The wh-word *who* presupposes John is married to someone, while the use of the alternative construction in example (18) presupposes that exactly one of the alternatives will prove to be true (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984: 30-31). Groenendijk and Stokhof also point out that the presuppositions which exist in interrogatives are always those of the speaker. If the presupposition fails, the question has no true answers, and the addressee does not reject the question itself, but rather the answers presupposed in the question (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984: 36).

The addressee may attempt to match his presuppositions to those of the speaker in order to allow the discourse to proceed in as smooth a way as possible; this is known as presupposition accommodation (Simons 2003: 260). If, for example, Mary utters the sentence *My son is ill* to
John, and John did not know that Mary had a son (and believed that Mary was a reliable source of information on the existence of her son), then he would adjust his presuppositions to include the presupposition that Mary had a song (Simons 2003: 259). Presupposition accommodation is important in this paper as it is this accommodation which allows for the success of an insulting rhetorical question. An IRQ exploits the fact that addressees will accommodate presuppositions in order to allow for the discourse to proceed smoothly by deliberately using such presuppositions in order to insult.

2.5 Definition of “Insult”

An insult will be defined as an utterance which expresses a disconnect between the views of the insulter and the insultee, in which the insult is a negative statement against a person or a group of people intended to undermine their self-image.

2.5.1 Mateo and Yus Categorization of Insults

Mateo Yus (2013) explore the various aspects of insults and come to the conclusion that there are four variables which are involved in the categorization of an insult: whether the insult is conventional or innovative (i.e. whether the insult relies more on generally accepted insults such as stupid or bastard, or whether the insult is of a creative and innovative style such that the particular insult might not have been uttered before); whether the underlying intention is to offend, praise (as in the affectionate use of the phrase you lucky bastard), or create a social bond; whether the insult is understood by the addressee or not; and whether the insultee reacts or not (Mateo and Yus : 2). The different combinations of these variables form twenty-four possible categories of insults in English.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus solely on insults which are used to offend and which would be classified by Mateo and Yus as “innovative” or “conventional.” The IRQs
presented in this paper will be either innovative or conventional. One of Mateo and Yus’
examples of an innovative, offensive, well-understood, and no-reaction insult is an insulting
rhetorical question in (19), which presupposes that the addressee is unemployed, a moron, and a
dork:

(19) What other problems do you have besides being unemployed, a moron, and a dork?

However, I am restricting the insults in this paper to ones which are understood by the
insultee. A poorly phrased, convoluted, or obscure use of presupposition may result in the insult
not having the intended effect. For example, in (20), the effect of the insult would fall flat if the
insultee does not know who Barry Manilow is, or if he does, is not aware of Manilow’s taste in
fashion.

(20) Does Barry Manilow know you raid his wardrobe?\(^3\)

All of the examples used in this paper have been verified by native English speakers as being
understood as being insulting.

2.5.2 Insult as a Psychological Wound

Insults have been widely studied in linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and other fields of
academia, and it appears that at its most basic, an insult is comparable to a psychological wound
or an injury (Neu 2008: 3). Neu notes that one need not, as the recipient of an insult, have a loss
of self-esteem or wholly believe the insult as it is is presented by the insulter. What is crucial for
the success of an insult is that the insultee come to the awareness that the insulter thinks worse of
the insultee than the insultee had previously assumed (Neu 2008: 34). This point will be an
important one to remember in terms of the use of presuppositions in insulting rhetorical
questions, because, although presuppositions force a certain conclusion from the insultee, the
insultee certainly does not have to agree with the insulter, and in fact it is this disconnect

\(^3\) Quote taken from the movie *The Breakfast Club* (1985).
between the insultee’s view of himself and the insulter’s implied view of the insultee that Neu captures in the description of the “rude recognition.”

2.5.3. Aspects of Insults Outside the Scope of this Paper

There are, in addition to the ideas described above, a number of factors which contribute to a particular utterance being interpreted as an insult. Inflection, for example, plays a significant role in whether a question is interpreted as insulting or not. Indeed, the insultee does not necessarily have to understand the specific meanings of the words used in order to take offense at a particular utterance (Neu 2008: 117). Neu uses an example from Shakespeare’s Henry IV, Part II (II.1.56-57) to illustrate this point.

(21) You scullion! You rampallian! You fustilarian! I’ll tickle your catastrophe!

While the use of inflection and other related phenomena are certainly an interesting aspect of the interpretation of insults, these particular phenomena are beyond the scope of this thesis.

2.6 Definition of “Tag Question”

The phrase hasn’t he in (29) is a tag question, which is a phrase added to the end of statement, consisting of a verb (either negated or not) and a pronoun which is co-referential with the subject of the statement, creating the semblance of an interrogative mood, but in reality retaining the mood (with some minor qualifications) of the original statement (McGregor 1995: 95).

(22) He’s read this book, hasn’t he?

English has a particularly extensive system of tag questions compared to other languages, in that tag questions can be formed with at least three different moods (indicative, interrogative, and imperative) in the stem of the tag question, and the polarity of the tag question can either agree or contrast with the polarity of the stem (McGregor 1995: 94). For example, in (21), the mood of
the stem *it’s hot out* is indicative, and there is a contrasting polarity between the stem of the question *it’s hot* and the tag question *isn’t it*?

(23) It’s hot out, isn’t it?

As stated above, the mood of the overall example, despite having the structure of an interrogative, remains an indicative statement, especially based on the falling tone that the tag question *isn’t it?* itself receives when spoken aloud.

Although there are many different moods that are possible in the formation of a tag question, for the purposes of this paper, I will be restricting my analysis and use of tag questions to those which convey the indicative mood. Although tag questions with an imperative reading are possible, as in (24), such a format does not convey the same meaning of rhetorical questions, based on the definition provided in section 2.2

(24) Come here, won’t you?

3. INSULTING RHETORICAL QUESTIONS (IRQs)

As stated in Section 1.1, an insulting rhetorical question will be defined for the purposes of this paper as an utterance with syntactic form of a question, including a question mark on the end when written, but with the semantic force of an assertion, whose main purpose is to abruptly convey the insulter’s negative view of the insultee. At first, it appears that IRQs would not be possible, because insults are by their nature a divisive phenomenon -- the insulter and the insultee do not agree about what is being said (see section 2.6), but rhetorical questions carry presuppositions that need to be agreed upon by the speaker and the addressee (see Section 2.4)

The insult is by definition not a communicative collaboration, but rather a communicative confrontation (Holod 1998:29). Thus in an insult such as (32), the speaker is presumably not
attempting to persuade the addressee of the correctness of his statement, but rather to set up a
distance between the insulter and the insultee.

(25) You are dumber than a sack of rocks.

Such “positive aggravation” as Păcurar classifies this phenomenon, is used to create distance
between the insulter and the insultee and to make the insultee aware the lack of approval which
he engenders in the insulter (2009: 281). The combination of this deliberate need for distance in
an insult with the prerequisite that the insulter and the insultee agree upon the conclusion of the
rhetorical question in order for it to be felicitous makes it seem as if the very concept of a
successful insulting rhetorical question would be an impossible one to achieve.

3.1 Presuppositions in Insulting Rhetorical Questions

The presence of presuppositions in IRQs appears to be a requirement for some of them to
be grammatical. The presupposition allows for many requirements of rhetorical questions to be
filled, which I believe to be one of the reasons that IRQs with innovative structure (see Section 6)
are impossible to form without a presupposition. Rhode argues that in order for a rhetorical to be
successful, both participants in an exchange must share a previously known commitment to a

One might also protest that being forced to contemplate the various (insulting) answers is
not the same as sharing a prior commitment. I will assume that while this is pragmatically true,
in a formal semantic manner the idea of presuppositions does circumvent the paradox by forcing
collaboration. An insultee does not have to normally collaborate with the insulter, as said above,
in order for the insult to be considered successful. This can be seen in a non-rhetorical question
insult such as (26), in which the insult is considered successful because the speaker has conveyed
a negative utterance about the addressee.
(26) You are so dumb!

4. FUNCTION OF PRESUPPOSITIONS IN INSULTING RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

4.1 Structure of Presuppositions Forces Collaboration

Ilie says that the speaker ultimately needs the addressee to agree with the indirect statement behind a rhetorical question, in this case an insult (1994: 103). I assert that the insultee can agree with the insulter about the truth of the insult (i.e. the insultee can believe that he is, in fact, fat and ugly), but that this agreement is not necessary. It is, however, the lack of collaboration, rather than the lack or presence of agreement, which is more important in terms of the success of the rhetorical question, meaning that the

One might protest that being forced to contemplate the various (insulting) answers is not the same as sharing a prior commitment. However, in a formal semantic way, the IRQ does force an agreement between the insulter and the insultee. The structure and semantic function of presuppositions force a similar conclusion, regardless of the insultee’s actual opinions on the subject, by restricting the answer set possible for any given insulting rhetorical question. For example, in a polar question such as (27), the possible answers are restricted to those which already contain the presupposition in (28):

(27) Does Barry Manilow know you raid his wardrobe?

(28) You raid Barry Manilow’s wardrobe.

The canonical answers to (27) are

(29) No, Barry Manilow doesn’t know I raid his wardrobe.

(30) Yes, Barry Manilow knows I raid his wardrobe.

Because both examples (29) and (30) contain an insult, and it is presupposed that there is an answer to question (27), as stated by Belnap then there is forced agreement between the insulter
and the insultee (Belnap 1966: 610).

4.2 Function of Covert Answers in Presuppositions in Insulting Rhetorical Questions

One might argue that there are other possible responses to (31) besides the canonical answers, including responses like *I'm not stupid!*

(31) Were you always this stupid or did you have to take lessons?4

While such answers are possible, I argue that they are produced because the insultee has already recognized the presupposition in (31), namely that the insultee is stupid, based on the canonical answers to (31), seen in (32) and (33)

(32) I was always this stupid.

(33) I had to take lessons to become this stupid.

A response such as *I'm not stupid!* indicates that the insultee already understands that question (31) contains the presupposition *You are stupid*, because the insultee covertly went through the possible answers ((32) and (33)) in their own head. The concept of the covert answer is important to understand when considering the impact of insulting rhetorical questions and possible responses to the question. Ilie argues that an implicit answer is one said mentally, while an explicit answer is one said out loud, and that in order to understand a rhetorical question, the listener must infer the implicit answer (1994: 102-3). The implicit answer is especially important for the concept of an insulting rhetorical question, because the answer can be arrived at mentally and no answer is necessary.

4.3 Non-Obvious Answers as Evidence of Covert Answers and Presuppositional Structure

The idea that the insultee has already understood the presupposition, interpreted it as an insult, and is reacting defensively when he utters a response such as *I'm not stupid!* can be demonstrated in a couple of ways. First, in an exchange such as (34), the response of Speaker B

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appears to violate the Gricean maxims of quantity and relevance; quantity because the
contribution was not as informative as the surface structure of the question Speaker A asked
would seem to demand, and relevance because the answer Speaker B gives appears to be
irrelevant based on the syntactic structure of Speaker A’s question (Grice 1975; cited Portner
2005: 200).

(34) Speaker A: Are you stupid or are you just high?
    Speaker B: Screw you!

However, because this exchange is a possible one, there appears to be more going on in the
background than is apparent on the surface. I argue that Speaker B has interpreted the
presupposition that he must be either high or stupid, concluded that this was offensive, and
reacted in an aggressive manner. Compare the exchange in example (28) with that of the one
below:

(35) Speaker A: Are you stupid or are you just high?
    Speaker B: *Waffles!

The exchange in (35) is semantically and pragmatically absurd, because it unquestionably
violates the Gricean maxims mentioned above, because there is no possibility of interpreting
Speaker A’s rhetorical question in such a way that Waffles! would be a logical response.
Comparing the exchange in (34) with the exchange in (35) suggests that, even when the insultee
does not verbalize the presupposing answers, he has already derived the answers from the
rhetorical questions and is responding to the insult contained within the answers. Only certain
replies to insulting rhetorical questions are possible, because only certain answers are possible
given the structure of the presupposition in the rhetorical question.
4.4 Answers to Insulting Rhetorical Questions are Derivable From Presupposition

Structure

Although Hannah Rhode makes many excellent points in her article on rhetorical questions, I do disagree with her assertion that “answers are selected by the discourse participants themselves and are not calculable from the structure of the question” (Rhode 2006:139). As I have stated before, it is precisely the structures of presuppositions which allow for the insult to be apparent. I claim that at least some insulting rhetorical questions can be uttered without any kind of context besides the understanding of the words themselves and the subconscious understanding of the presupposition itself. If a stranger were to come up to someone and ask (36), even if the person at whom this question does not understand exactly why he is being insulted, he will understand despite lack of context that he is being insulted, based on the presupposition in (37).

(36) Does Barry Manilow know you raid his wardrobe?

(37) You raid Barry Manilow’s wardrobe.

apparent in the rhetorical question (this presupposition is based on the factive verb know. The listener does not need to agree with the sentiment of sentence (37) to feel insulted, and in fact, it is quite often because the listener does not agree with the point of view of the insulter that he feels so insulted.

4.5 Answers to Insulting Rhetorical Questions Have no Skewed Answer

The use of presuppositions also fits in with Rhode’s theory of “skewed answers” in rhetorical questions (Rhode 2006: 147). Rhode argues that rhetorical questions are used only if the answer set is skewed toward a certain possible answer (Rhode 2006: 147). Due to the structure of the presupposition, the answers are not necessarily sufficiently skewed (one answer
might not be more likely than another answer), but all or at least most possible answers contain
the necessary element of the insult. For example, if someone were to ask the rhetorical question

(38) Why am I having a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent?^5

the answer set is not skewed in that the insulter is not looking for the insultee to arrive at a
specific answer. Rather, the insulter wants the insultee to come to realize that all answers contain
the inherent insult due to the structure of the presupposition. In this way, insulting rhetorical
questions differ from non-insulting rhetorical questions, in that insulting rhetorical questions are
focused on the answer set as a whole rather than one answer specifically.

5. SPECIFIC TYPES OF PRESUPPOSITIONS IN INNOVATIVE INSULTING
RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

5.1 Factive Presuppositions

One of the types of presuppositions is factive presuppositions, and it is formed using a
verb which requires the complement to be true. “Factive verbs” require the complement to be
true, and also verbs which do not require the complement to be true. Verbs such as believe, think,
and hope do not require the complement to be true, whereas verbs such as know do. From (39),
one cannot necessarily conclude that (40) is true.

(39). Jane believed that her dog had died.

(40) Jane’s dog had died.

However, from (41), one must necessarily conclude that that (42) is true (Cooper 1974: 14).

(41) Mary knew that her dog had died.

(42) Mary’s dog had died.

This same use of verbs which require their complements to be true can be seen in (43):

(43) Do you realize you’re being stupid?

^5 Quote taken from the @bestinsults Twitter account, accessed 16 November 2013.
The complement you’re being stupid must necessarily be true due to the use of the verb realize which requires that its complement be true. Any canonical answer to this question would require that the complement be true. The canonical answers are those seen in (44) and (45).

(44) Yes, I realize I’m being stupid
(45) No, I don’t realize I’m being stupid.

Another reason why rhetorical insults why the canonical answers seen in (44) and (45) allow for the presupposition to be true is because the negation of an utterance with a presupposed clause beginning with a verb such as realize does not negate the presupposition itself (Cooper 1974: 12). For example, (45) means that the insultee did not realize he was being stupid, not that he was not stupid.

There is a subset of verbs which I believe are almost the exact opposite of factive verbs, in which the complement cannot be true, and the insult results from this requirement of the presupposition. Examples of verbs such as these are pretend. The comedian Jimmy Carr responded to a heckler who was attempting to be funnier than Carr asked

(46) Are you pretending you can read?6

When Carr asks Are you pretending you can read?, the presupposition is that the heckler cannot read, and this presupposition comes from the fact that to say that someone is pretending to do something that they can already, in fact, do would be illogical. The statement

(47) *Harry pretends to be a doctor.

would make no sense semantically if Harry is actually a doctor. Therefore, the sting of the insult Are you pretending you can read? lies in the fact that the presupposition is that the person cannot read. What is particularly interesting about insulting rhetorical questions is the answers that are possible. In answering the question Are you pretending to read? there is the possible answer of

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6 Quote taken from this YouTube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzLILM7Rgm8
(48) which would contain the insult, because no one who could actually read would pretend to
read.

(48) Yes, I’m pretending to read.

However, the negative answer of the question would be (49), which is an ambiguous statement,
because one would be unable to tell if the speaker could read based on that answer alone.

(49) No, I’m not pretending to read.

5.2 Use of Wh- Words as Adverbials

Many insulting and taunting rhetorical questions use a wh-word, as in the questions (46) and (47):

(50) A: How does it feel to be the same size as a third-grader?

B: How does it feel to be at their reading level?

(51) Why am I having a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent?

The wh-words are presuppositional, because if one is asking how, why, or when something
happened, one is presupposing that the event did, in fact, happen.

In addition to the adverbial usage of wh-questions in IRQs as seen above, there is also an
existential presupposition in IRQs with the question word who, as seen in the question

(52) Who died and made you queen?

in which it is presupposed that someone died (Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984: 33).

Although IRQs beginning with wh-words do exist, these forms have been in my
experience much rarer than polar or alternative questions. I believe this is because it is easier to
guarantee an insulting reading if there are only two possible canonical answers, as opposed to the
multitude of answers possible for questions (50)-(52). This perception of difficulty might have to
do with the pragmatics of speech, because although in a formal semantic way, the use of wh-
words and other presuppositional devices forces collaboration, pragmatically the insultee does not wish to collaborate with the insulter, and can respond accordingly. The presence of many possible worlds leaves greater room for counter-insults or clever comebacks using elements of answers contained in the Hamblin set. In addition, the forms of these IRQs which begin with wh-words often seem to be quite formal, and several native speakers told me that the question (51) *Why am I having a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent?* would not be produced in colloquial speech.

By contrast, a polar or alternative question more obviously forces an insulting reading, because the insultee is forced to choose between two options which are almost entirely derivable from the syntax of the question asked, whereas wh-questions have more open-ended answers possible.

### 5.3 Iterative Presuppositions

Another type of presupposition is referred to by Kripke as the *iterative presupposition*, and is a presupposition that is based on a time frame (Soames 1982: 488, cited Kripke 2009:368). What makes this type of presupposition different from the aspectual presupposition, however, is that an iterative presupposition focuses on repetition, whereas aspectual presuppositions focus on a single point of change (or lack of change) in time, as seen in the adverbs *still, no longer*, etc. One adverb used to portray an iterative presupposition is the adverb *again*, as in the insulting rhetorical question

(53) *Are you making a fool of yourself again?*

presupposing that the insultee made a fool of himself at one point.

### 5.4. Definite Description Presupposition
One way to form presuppositions in insulting rhetorical questions is the use of the determiner *the*, which indicates that there is such as tangible object. For example, in the sentence

(54) The king of France is bald.

the use of the determiner *the* presupposes that there is such a person as the king of France. The use of the determiner *the* in an insulting rhetorical question can be seen in the question, in which a comedian, speaking in front of an audience, uses the following IRQ to talk about a group of people who have been talking the entire show

(55) How are the idiots in the corner doing?\(^7\)

By using *the* in example (55), the speaker is presupposing that there exists such a group of idiots, namely the ones in the corner.

5.5. *Or* as Presupposition

*Or* can be used to as a presupposition, as in (56), in which it is presupposed that one, and only one, of these alternatives presented must be true.

(56) Are you done for the day or do you have more work to do?

In the context of this questions, it would be impossible for any other alternative to be possible (although, as discussed in section 2.5, the presupposition might be incorrect, but as was also explained in section 2.5, with presupposition accommodation, the addressee attempts to accommodate all presuppositions so that the conversation goes as smoothly as possible). An example of an insulting rhetorical question with this type of presupposition would be (57) in which it is presumed that one of these options must be true:

(57) Were you always this stupid or did you have to take lessons?

6. INSULTING RHETORICAL QUESTIONS WITH INNOVATIVE STRUCTURES

6.1 Innovative Structures and Innovative Insulting Material

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\(^7\) Quote taken from this YouTube video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OU7_BeWmTY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OU7_BeWmTY)
Mateo and Yus (2013) contrast *innovative* insults with *conventional* insults. However, they do not appear to focus on the difference between innovative *insulting material* and innovative *structure*, a distinction which I will attempt to make clear in order to better defend my argument (Mateo and Yus 2013: 2).

In their article, Mateo and Yus define innovative insults in contrast to conventional insults. Conventional insults, they argue, have less of an impact after having been accepted into general understanding, and that to counter this lack of impact, speakers often turn to innovative insults, which do not contain linguistic material which is recognized in the speaking community as inherently insulting, and use this material in such a way that it becomes insulting (Mateo and Yus 2013: 2). One example that Mateo and Yus give as an example of an innovative insult is a famous exchange between Lady Astor and Winston Churchill

(58) Lady Astor: If I were married to you, I’d put poison in your coffee
     Winston Churchill: If you were my wife, I’d drink it. (Mateo and Yus 2013: 5)

Although Mateo and Yus do not go into detail about this particular example, it is clear that it is an innovative insult in that it is a new expression, presumably never uttered before, or at least one that has not entered the general consciousness of the speech community as “insulting” and, in contrast to a conventional insult, there is no particular part of this statement which would be inherently insulting in and of itself.

Although Mateo and Yus do not make this distinction, I will propose the idea that there are two separate aspects of innovation in insults: *innovative material* and *innovative structure*.

6.2 Innovative Material in Insulting Rhetorical Questions

Innovative material, in an expansion of the idea of innovation in Mateo and Yus’ 2013 article, is insulting material which is not inherently insulting, and can only be interpreted as
insulting in certain contexts. For example, in the insulting rhetorical question (59), the insulting material is *Barry Manilow’s wardrobe*

(59) Does Barry Manilow know you raid his wardrobe?

This phrase would not be insulting in every instance, but in the opinion of the insulter in the example above, *Barry Manilow’s wardrobe* is in poor taste and is therefore considered to be insulting material. *Barry Manilow’s wardrobe* is not inherently insulting, as would be the case with conventional insulting material, and therefore will be classified as innovative insulting material.

6.3. **Innovative Structure in Insulting Rhetorical Questions**

In contrast to the innovative material discussed in the previous section, an innovative structure has nothing to do with the insulting material itself in the IRQ. Rather, an innovative structure has to do with the syntactic structure of the sentence, and whether it is a structure (which can be both the syntactic structure or the intonation, or a combination of both) that must always receive an insulting reading. Innovative insulting structures must not be always interpreted as insulting, and indeed only receive an insulting reading when insulting material (either conventional or innovative) is presupposed in the structure. (60) is an example of an insulting rhetorical question with an innovative structure

(60) Are you always this stupid or did you have to take lessons?

The structure seen in the above question appears syntactically to be a question which, had different material been inserted into the structure, would not be insulting. The structure consist of using the phrase *or* to present two different options, one of which the listener is intended to select. A similar structure can be seen in the non-insulting question in (61) in which the speaker is not intending to insult the listener.
Were you always this calm naturally or did you take some kind of yoga lessons?

In contrast to a conventional insulting rhetorical question, an innovative insulting rhetorical question structure does receive an insulting reading until insulting material is inserted and presupposed into the structure.

7. INSULTING RHETORICAL QUESTIONS WITH CONVENTIONAL STRUCTURES

Presuppositional insulting material need not necessarily be found in insulting rhetorical questions with conventional structures (discussed in section 7.1). A conventional structure, which consists of a particular syntactic structure or intonation, or a combination of the two, is a formulaic construction in which certain elements are always present, thus guaranteeing an insulting reading and making the presupposition unnecessary.

7.1 Conventional Structure and Conventional Insulting Material

Conventional insults, according to Mateo and Yus’ taxonomy, are phrases, words, or statements which are systematically used in an insulting manner, and are thus recognized by speakers in a particular speech community as being “insulting.” Examples of conventional insults in English would include you bastard, stupid, and you son-of-a-bitch. Mateo and Yus extend this definition of insult to include entire clauses, as seen in their example:

(62) You are an asshole. (Mateo and Yus 2013: 91)

For the purposes of this paper, I will further sub-divide the linguistic category of conventional insult to include both conventional structures and conventional insulting material.

7.2 Conventional Insult Structures in Insulting Rhetorical Questions

A conventional structure will be defined for the purposes of this paper as a formulaic or semi-formulaic structure which guarantees an insulting interpretation, a particular intonation
which guarantees an insulting interpretation, or a combination of both. An example of a
formulaic or semi-formulaic conventional insult structure can be seen in the question

(63) What are you, stupid?

I analyze this structure to consist of the formulaic pattern

(64) What are you, [ADJECTIVE]?

or

(65) What are you, [NOUN PHRASE]

and that brackets seen above can be filled in by many different adjectives or noun phrases and
still receive the insulting reading. This can be seen in a slightly different construction

(66) What are you, a moron?

in which the noun phrase a moron has been inserted where the adjective stupid was used in
example (63) seen above.

The guarantee of an insulting reading when a conventional insult structure is used can be
seen in the fact that, even when the adjective or noun phrase is neutral (i.e. not conventionally or
innovatively insulting in isolation), the entirety of the rhetorical question will receive an insulting
reading. This can be seen when the phrase a nun is used. Normally, the noun phrase a nun has
neither a positive nor negative reading, as seen in the question

(67) Are you a nun?

in which the asker is genuinely seeking to find out whether the other person is, in fact, a nun.
When the noun phrase a nun is inserted into the What are you, [NOUN PHRASE]? , the rhetorical
question has an inherently insulting reading in which the negative qualities associated with nuns
are emphasized:

(68) What are you, a nun?
In this way, conventional structures force an insulting reading, no matter which words, phrases, or clauses are used to fill in the conventional structure template. This can also be seen when a positive term, such as some kind of genius, is inserted into the structure, as seen in (69):

(69) What are you, some kind of genius?

Another way that conventional structure can appear is in the form of tag questions. In this form, both a partially-filled-in conventional structure and a particular intonation are needed to receive the insulting reading. An example of an insulting rhetorical question containing such a tag question is:

(70) Thinking isn’t your strong point, is it?\(^8\)

I classify this as a conventional structure with the form

(71) \[NP\] isn’t \[NP\], is it?

in which many noun phrases can be inserted in the bracketed [NP] spots. In addition, although this fact is not visible when written down, when spoken aloud, the tag question part of the rhetorical question is it? receives a falling intonation. This can be seen in contrast to a tag question in which the speaker is genuinely unsure of his statement and is asking for confirmation, as in the question

(72) German isn’t your major, is it?

in which the tag question is it? receives a rising intonation.

In addition, a conventional structure can consists solely of an intonation, which is why the Shakespeare quote seen in section 2.5.3 receives the insulting reading that it does

(73) You scullion! You rampallian! You fustilarian! I’ll tickle your catastrophe!

The insultee need not understand all or, in fact, any of the polysyllabic words in the above statement to understand that they are being insulted.

\(^8\) Quote taken from this website: http://amibeingcatty.wordpress.com/2013/11/01/comebacks-i-wish-i-had-said/
7.3 Presuppositions in Conventional Insulting Structures

The insulting material in an IRQ with conventional material need not be presupposed, because it will always receive an insulting reading due to the syntactic structure and intonation alone. These are structures which have to be memorized as insulting, and are therefore conventional insult whose structures just happen to be that of a rhetorical question, and there is therefore no need for the insulting material to be presupposed in IRQs with innovative structures.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this paper was to provide a way of explaining the paradox of insulting rhetorical questions. The inherent paradox of insulting rhetorical questions is that the requirements for a felicitous rhetorical question appear to be at odds with the requirements for a felicitous insult. In order for a rhetorical question to be successful, both parties in the discourse must agree and collaborate upon the answer to that rhetorical question. For example, in order for the rhetorical question *Isn't that amazing?* to be successful, both parties must agree on the same answer and be confident that the other person will give the same or a similar response. A rhetorical question would not be considered successful if the questioner asked the question knowing that the listener would not consider the situation to be amazing. Agreement between parties is necessary in rhetorical questions.

By contrast, an insult requires that the parties of the discourse do not collaborate. An insult can be defined as an utterance meant to abruptly highlight the difference in how the insulter views the insultee and how the insultee views himself. The insulter is ultimately using the insult to demoralize the insultee. The non-agreement of the insulter and the insultee is therefore essential, and seems to be fundamentally at odds with the necessity of agreement between the two parties of a rhetorical question.
I have proposed in this paper that there are two separate semantic constructions which serve to circumvent this apparent paradox, namely the innovative and conventional structures of insulting rhetorical questions. Within each of these constructions, there are specific elements which allow an insulting rhetorical question to fulfill the requirements of both a felicitous insult and a felicitous rhetorical question.

An innovative structure is a syntactic structure which does not automatically receive an insulting reading. Because IRQs with innovative structure such as *Are you always this stupid or are you making a special effort today?* do not automatically receive an insulting reading, they rely on presuppositions to overcome the paradox. In a successful IRQ with an innovative structure, the insulting material is presupposed, guaranteeing that any canonical answer to the rhetorical question holds the insult to be true, thus forcing “collaboration” and “agreement” between the insulter and the insultee. However, because this is an agreement only in a formal semantic manner, there is still a gap between what the insultee believes about himself and what the insulter believes about the insultee, thus maintaining the requirements of a felicitous insult. These innovative structures thus require these presuppositions in order to successfully circumvent the paradox.

The other structure possible for IRQs is a conventional structure, which has either a partially-formulaic syntactic structure, a particular intonation pattern, or a combination of both which forces an insulting reading no matter what material is inserted into the structure. One common example of such a conventional structure a tag question such as *What are you, some kind of genius?* which will receive an insulting reading no matter what material is inserted into the structure. Unlike IRQs with innovative structure, IRQs with conventional structures do not require presuppositions, because the IRQ will automatically receive an insulting reading and
there is no need for the material to be presupposed. These types of structures overcome the
paradox of insulting rhetorical questions because they are insulting structures that just happen to
be rhetorical questions.

Both innovative and conventional structures overcome the paradox of insulting rhetorical
questions - the innovative through presuppositions and the conventional through formulaic
constructions - thus allowing the felicitous use of a semantic construction that seemed at first to
be impossible.
Works Cited


