Comical hypothetical: arguing for a conversational phenomenon

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ABSTRACT This study makes a case for the conversational phenomenon the authors have named the *comical hypothetical* (*CH*). The *CH* becomes discursively co-created during ongoing conversation when one or more speakers depart from the normal turn-taking system and engage in the interactional creation of an imaginary world. Data stem from ethnographic observations as well as from spontaneous recordings of social situations in three different locations. Out of 20 hours of taped conversations, 10 recognizable *CH* segments were analyzed for the present study. The authors present a macro-structure analysis of the *comical hypothetical* using Hymes's (1962, 1974) *SPEAKING* mnemonic, with an emphasis on the act sequence. A second-level micro-analysis uncovers the interactional properties of the *CH* using a conversation analytic approach. The examination reveals a distinct four-part act sequence of the *CH* made up of intricate and creative interactional turns. Lastly, the significance and functions of the *CH* are also discussed.

KEY WORDS: *communication, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, ethnography of communication, Hymes, imagery*

In this article we would like to make a case for a conversational phenomenon that we have chosen to name the *comical hypothetical* (hereinafter the *CH*). Most generally, the *comical hypothetical* is created in an impromptu fashion by one or several speakers who discursively create hypothetical or, in some cases, highly improbable scenarios. The *CH* may occur within the genre of the ordinary conversation, although one can encounter it within formal genres, such as the lecture, business meeting, or sermon. It is usually introduced by a preface, for example, 'just imagine if . . .' or 'wouldn't it be funny if . . .', and may comprise one or several turns. Once an interlocutor has prefaced the *CH*, other participants may either attend to the *CH* with minimal support cues (such

as chuckling), while allowing him or her to engage alone in conversational play, or they may choose to actively participate in the play by discursively co-creating the imaginary world with the initiator of the *CH*. The completion of the *CH* is not predetermined, although many times it is laughter that terminates its production. In this description, the *CH* appears to fall under the category of a speech event that exhibits a particular sequential structure (Hymes, 1974). It is therefore recognizable to experience and isolatable for analysis as a particular speech phenomenon that forms at the juncture of storytelling, humor, and imagination.

It is the discursive particularity of the *comical hypothetical* that this essay aspires to expose by offering a syncretic analysis based on two complimentary perspectives.[1] Presuming that the *CH* is not simply an item of talk but rather a way of speaking, we suggest that ethnography of communication and conversation analysis be engaged toward that task. In this way, we intend to show both the structural parameters of the phenomenon but also to demonstrate how the *comical hypothetical* evolves in naturally occurring talk. By way of attending to the structure and uses of the *CH*, we intend to show its culture-specific place in interpersonal communication. Our findings are expected to inform a variety of academic and non-academic perspectives, including the research on humor, storytelling, and cultural communication as well as the problem-solving and affiliative aspects of verbal play.

We preview our dual analysis with a brief literature review that positions the *comical hypothetical* within the field of communication studies as an interactional phenomenon. The rationale and the description of the two methods will follow. For our data, we use conversational excerpts collected in various locations within the United States. In conclusion, we offer a brief summary of our findings and outline the significance of the *CH* as well as venues for future research.

Pertinent literature

As a conversational phenomenon, the *comical hypothetical* can be traced to a wide body of research that focuses on one or several of its main facets: storytelling, joking, and use of imagery. The three facets correspond to the three different levels of communicative activity, which situate them in respective methodological fields. Most commonly the first two facets fall under the jurisdiction of conversation analysis, while the last one is often tackled in the discourse analytic register.

The literature on storytelling provides us with a solid starting point for understanding the composition of the *comical hypothetical*. As any other story, the *CH* breaks the free-flowing turn-taking structure of a conversation by having one speaker take the floor for an extended turn (Sacks, 1971). In order for this to occur, the story must be occasioned, that is, the story either gets invited by a conversational partner (e.g. 'What is the matter with you?', 'Is anything wrong?'), or the speaker who wishes to tell a story self-selects by announcing a story or making a bid to tell it (e.g. 'You wanna hear what happened to me last night?') (Sacks, 1974). Depending on the kind of a story to be introduced, as well as the relationship between and among the participants, these prefacing offers may be

long, elaborate, and repetitive or brief interjections. In an extended typology of prefaces, Mandelbaum (1987) distinguishes among the remote approach, the forwarding, the ratification, the monitoring, and the complementary tellings. Consequently, Mandelbaum claims that by focusing on how the participants 'collaboratively construct the beginning of the telling and share the telling itself', one can infer about the current status of their relationship (1987: 162).

After the story's joint production occurs over multiple turns, in order for the normal turn-taking of the conversation to resume, the story must have a recognizable ending that would signal to the interlocutors that, as an activity, it is over. Levinson (1983) reports on various ways stories can end; for example, humorous stories may end in a typical punchline with signaling laughter (see Sacks, 1974), or they can also end by returning participants to the topic discussed prior to the initiation of the story (see Jefferson, 1978). Much like the beginning of the story, or preface, the story's ending provides a commentary on the relationship between the participants: an expectation of laughter in a situation where the participants have little familiarity with each other may force the storyteller to prolong her or his punchline. Likewise, an all too familiar story told before a group of relatives may instigate a collaborative completion (Mandelbaum, 1987).

In a concise summary of storytelling, Polanyi (1985) identifies certain structural parameters that condition any story: a) the presence of the past events; b) the point that leads the story to a predictable conclusion, and c) conventional means of telling. To this, Polanyi adds corresponding interactional constraints: a) the point of the story must be relevant to the preceding talk and grow out of that talk; b) the story must be integrated into the talk; c) the story must be tailored to the recipient ambiance, that is, audience-in-context. In a similar attempt to come up with the universals for the making of a story, Tracy (2002) proposes that everyday stories have three main features: 1) the talk concerns a particular time when an actor experienced an event – often this event is a problem but it need not be; 2) the event being told about is newsworthy – out of the ordinary and/or interesting in some way; 3) an evaluation of the event is conveyed. Overall, the key function of a story seems to entrust it with the rendition of some past events that may be newsworthy, problematic, or pursue a metacommunicative purpose.[2]

Both the structural parameters of the story and its many purposes reflect the design and the trajectory of the *comical hypothetical*. Yet essential differences indicate that the *CH* is not quite a regular story. On the one hand, it is certainly preface-oriented. The introductory 'just imagine', for example, marks the *CH* as a kind of a story. As any other story the *CH* is told sequentially, although the preference for the *CH* clearly falls on collaborative completion and co-participation. As it is not bound to a specific context, the *CH* tolerates a wide formal–informal continuum. For that reason, certain phases of the *CH* can be rather loosely structured. For example, unlike a joke, the *CH* does not gravitate toward a punchline but rather focuses on the material in play, that is, the imaginary. This defines the key objective of the *CH*: to create a scenario that is out of the ordinary and/or interesting, thus prodding other interlocutors

to join in or, at the very least, enjoy the discursive creation that is the *comical hypothetical* itself. While doing this apparently entertaining work, the *CH* may perform other work, for example, relational work as in joining the participants in laughter. The playful character of the *CH* may account for the fact that it does not refer to an already experienced event, rather it is an imaginary, not-yet-experienced or never-to-be-experienced event that is discursively created in the moment. Therefore, the *CH* may belong to a subspecies of the story, that is, the joke, the possibility of which we examine in a subsequent section.

Before moving to the pertinent literature on joke-telling, it is important for us to consider one final type of storytelling that has its roots in what social psychologists label 'counterfactual thinking' (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Roese and Olson, 1995). Research in this area shows that when making decisions, groups often invoke 'fictional narratives (concerning either past events or anticipated future events), about *antecedent* facts and how an outcome might have been (or might still be) different' (Sunwolf, 2006: 109). Building on this body of work, Sunwolf moved the focus from cognitive processes to communicative behaviors by examining what she calls 'counterfactual storytelling' among criminal trial jurists during decision-making discussions. Specifically, Sunwolf (2006: 122) explicated five categories of shared counterfactual narratives and proposed the Decisional Regret Theory (DERT) that 'predicts a type of shared communication (counterfactual storytelling) under specific circumstances (anticipation of making a meaningful decision)'.

While counterfactual storytelling does have similarities to the *comical hypothetical*, both the phenomenon itself as well as Sunwolf's (2006) communicative approach differ considerably from the present study. First, counterfactual storytelling is based in what Sunwolf (2006: 122) calls 'regret anxiety'; that is, people tell stories about what could have been or what might still be 'in order to reduce anxiety from the anticipated regret of unwanted outcomes'. In the case of the *comical hypothetical*, interlocutors may achieve decision-making as a byproduct; however, rather than being rooted in anxiety, the *CH* bases itself in interpersonal, social, and cultural functions, for example entertainment, affiliation, reprimand, and/or displays of historical and cultural knowledge. Second, counterfactual storytelling has been studied in the realm of jury deliberations, that is, small group discussions between strangers in a constrained context with concrete goals of decision-making in play. The present study examines the *comical hypothetical*, however, in interpersonal as well as small group interactions, across a variety of contexts between strangers and intimates, and within mundane, everyday interactions with no specific goals fixed at the outset. Finally, the research approach taken by Sunwolf (2006), while communicative in nature, does not deal with the macro- and micro-interactional specificities that are outlined for the *CH* in the present study; that is, until now, the turn-by-turn accomplishment of this type of discursive phenomenon has yet to be explicated.

Having examined the pertinent literature on storytelling, we now turn to research on joking in order to further illumine the origins of the *comical hypothetical*. According to Sacks (1974: 353), 'jokes are built in the form of stories

and told with the use of organizational techniques reserved for stories'. While important for the telling of a story, the preface sequence is also important for the joke. It typically takes two turns to display that the participants are aligned for the subsequent, proper joke-telling sequential production. The aforementioned example of the *CH*'s preface, 'Just imagine . . .', does not require an acceptance for offering the first part. However, for the *CH* to develop in a dialogical fashion, with the two speakers participating in the construction of a story, the aligning component would still be needed. Laughter could be such a component, as in what Sacks (1974: 346) calls an 'approving chuckle'. For the *CH* the chuckle means readiness to listen and thus approval to proceed. This would satisfy 'the understanding test' (p. 346). The punchline in the completion sequence points to another important difference between the *comical hypothetical* and the joke. As we have already mentioned, the completion sequence in the *CH* is fairly open but can typically finish in joint laughter or with other completion techniques, such as the exit marker of irony, 'Yeah, exactly'.[3] Sometimes, the initiation of the *CH* occurs by referencing some real event, which is usually the topic of the conversation at the particular moment prior to the *CH*. The referenced event itself can be quite normal and absolutely unremarkable. Moreover, in order for interlocutors to create a successful *comical hypothetical*, they discursively construct an imaginary journey based on precisely real, unremarkable events, so that they may make their contrasting hypothetical indeed comical or humorous. Thus, interlocutors create through the talk abnormal or extreme worlds with and about which they can discursively play. This tendency to the extra-ordinary brings us to the third component of the *comical hypothetical*: the imaginary.

As a property of imagination, the imaginary is linked to rich research corpora in a variety of disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, linguistics, and philology, among others. We are bypassing this substantial body of research (e.g. Jackson, 1981; Todorov, 1973), largely due to its incompatibility with the subject of this article. The phenomenon of the *comical hypothetical* is grounded in relational dynamics. Its structure and its pragmatics are therefore motivated by these dynamics. More pertinent are discourse analytic and sociolinguistic studies of the imaginary (Hymes, 1981; Tannen, 1989). For example, in her study of the imaginary used in written and spoken discourse, Tannen distinguished between the dialogical and monological use of imagery. The former gives details to the discourse, and the latter specifies the speaker and her or his degree of self-awareness and self-reflection. Hence, the use of imagery 'can either enhance or threaten rapport, depending on the interactional styles of the participants' (Tannen, 1989: 147).

With the *comical hypothetical*, the use of imagery as a stylistic device is equally essential; yet the commentary made is less on the speakers as persons but rather the speakers as players in the creation of the *CH*. In their review of imagination in narrative discourse, Clark and Van der Wege (2001: 783) refer to an activity of making images as 'joint pretense'. Building on the insights borrowed from Bateson, Goffman, and Tannen, we will introduce a number of examples that show the role of pretense in posing 'the narrative world as if it were an actual

world' (p. 783). 'Make believe' is the closest description that seems to have managed to match all the facets of the *comical hypothetical*. Yet there is a limitation. The interlocutors creating the *CH* play, but their division into roles is not as finely defined as in make believe. Nor can the *CH* be reduced to a conversational function as is the case with figurative expressions (Drew and Holt, 1988, 1998; Holt and Drew, 2005). The *CH* does not only carry a supportive function for the preceding discourse, but rather appears to constitute a phenomenon of its own. We therefore believe that the study of the *CH* makes a distinctive contribution to the social world; at the same time, the many facets of the *CH* present a methodological difficulty. We suggest that this difficulty be resolved with the help of a joint methodology. We expect that the application of such a methodology will provide an additional benefit for the discourse analytic research by showing its broad scope as well as flexibility. In the next section we address the methodological issues previewed by a brief description of data.

Method

This study is based on various corpora of data. One source of data was the ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted by one of the authors in a central US state over the course of two summers in 2003 and 2004. The fieldwork was part of an ethnographic study of legal practice with a focus on criminal defense. The project design demanded the ethnographer's presence at various institutional and private events, during which naturally occurring conversations were routinely recorded. During analyses of the recordings for the legal study, the phenomenon we now refer to as the *comical hypothetical* made itself apparent as a unique and salient feature of the participants' talk. Given these circumstances, this type of talk prompted us to first question if it were not a kind of local joking style. Our further inquiries into the nature of this speech event revealed that it transcended just one local community and could manifest itself in various contexts and geographical locations. We then began to collect data by way of spontaneous recording of social situations in three different locations, that is, towns in South Dakota, Illinois, and New Jersey, respectively. We collected a total of 20 hours of tape in these locations, and after a preliminary analysis, 18 segments were singled out as recognizable *comical hypotheticals*. For the purposes of this study, 10 segments were used as the primary data samples; our choice of these depended almost entirely on factors such as quality of the recording and size of the *CH* sequence.

In the following, we present a discourse analysis of the *comical hypothetical* utilizing two main analytic tools: first, Hymes's (1962, 1974) *SPEAKING* mnemonic and, second, a conversation analysis pragmatics approach (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Sacks et al., 1978; Schegloff and Sacks, 1974). We take the former methodological tool as part of a macro-approach. Previous studies have successfully applied Hymes's mnemonic to describe the components and inherent structure of communication rituals (Katriel, 1990; Katriel and Philipsen, 1981). The above disclosed emphasis on the ritualistic character of the *CH* makes the *SPEAKING* mnemonic a particularly fitting way to uncover

the macro-structural features of the *CH*, such as the *act sequence*. Conversation analysis pragmatics informs a more micro-inquiry into the interactional creativity of speakers engaging in the *CH*. Here we emphasize the contextual analysis of the conversational action that embraces both 'the immediately local configuration of preceding activity in which an utterance occurs, and also the "larger" environment of activity within which that configuration is recognized to occur' (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 18). There have been various authors who have called for connecting both micro- and macro-analyses (Alexander and Giesen, 1987; Collins, 1981; Ellis, 1999; Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984; Moerman, 1988), while others argue that such combinations are near impossible (Sanders, 1999). Conscious of the tenuous nature of the macro–micro link, in our analysis we follow the connection described by Schegloff (1987: 218) as 'contexts of the middle range'.

The discursive creation of the comical hypothetical

First, we approach the data samples of the *comical hypothetical* using the framework developed by Dell Hymes (1962, 1974), the components of which are often summarized under what is more generally known as the *SPEAKING* mnemonic. In the following analysis of the data corpus, we use a subset of the *SPEAKING* framework in order to better explicate the components of the *comical hypothetical,* placing a special emphasis on the *act sequence*.

GENRE

The *comical hypothetical* is a speech event that is recognizably set off from ongoing conversation through its structural components and functions. To approach the *CH* as a speech event means to analyze how its speech acts are combined into larger units directed towards a variety of functions. This is in contrast to the study of scripts, which have similar templates as speech events, but are instead directed toward an identified speech function (Hatch, 1992).

We propose the *comical hypothetical* to be a cross between the genres of storytelling and joke-telling. Structurally, it resembles the form of a story; however, the function of a *comical hypothetical* is, in many cases, to gain a show of appreciation and/or laughter from the recipients (among other functions), much like in joke-telling. Although stories and jokes seem to be appropriate frames and/or comparison speech events on which to base an analysis of the *comical hypothetical*, there also seem to exist important differences between these three speech events that will be discussed in subsequent sections.

TOPIC OR MESSAGE CONTENT

The topic of the *comical hypothetical* is an imaginary or hypothetical situation. The topical building blocks of the *CH* stem from the ongoing conversational or situational context in the moment. Within an ongoing conversation, one speaker may use the present conversational topic, or a component thereof, to build an imaginary 'what if' scenario. There is a marked shift from speaking about real-world occurrences to speaking about the imaginary and unlikely. The *CH* is

conversational play, and the recipient may choose to watch the initiator of a *CH* play alone (with or without recipient's acknowledgment of the intended humor), or the recipient may choose to actively engage in the play by co-creating the imaginary world with the initiator of the *comical hypothetical*.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants are potentially all the persons the initiator considers responsive to the imaginary, either as strict recipients or as co-creators. Participants are likely to be those persons with whom the initiator is well acquainted or intimate, although this does not necessarily have to be the case. At the very least, because common cultural knowledge of what is possible and what is impossible, as well as what is comical and what is serious, is necessary for the success of the *comical hypothetical*, participants must share a common linguistic code and will most likely be members of speech communities sharing similar value systems (Hymes, 1974). The data in the present study were collected from white, middle- to upper-class males and females between the ages of 28 and 74 in three different US states: New Jersey, Illinois, and South Dakota. While the participants do not all share one geographic location, they could all be labeled as Nacirema (see Katriel and Philipsen, 1981) who utilize similar speech codes (Philipsen, 1992).

ACT SEQUENCE

The act sequence includes the ordering of communicative acts within a larger communicative event. Saville-Troike (1982) explains the purpose of act sequence analysis for the ethnography of communication:

> Although description is usually at a level of abstraction which accounts for regular patterns in recurring events, verbatim examples are useful as illustrations [. . .] This level of abstraction not only allows regular patterns to be displayed, but cross-cultural comparisons to be made. (pp. 146–7)

Depending on the type of communication analyzed, the act sequence can take on a rather rigid form, with specific expectations of which communicative act precedes and/or follows another. Communication rituals such as greetings, leave-taking, and complimenting include these kinds of rigid act sequences. Communicative events with more fixed act sequences often fall into what Carbaugh calls 'cultural frames', that involve 'a culturally coded term, [. . .] which identifies a kind of speaking familiar to, identified, performed, and evaluated by "native" speakers' (1990: 160). Oftentimes, the native speaker will be able to label the communicative event with a cultural term for talk (or metacommunicative term), which points to the event's salience for a speech community.

On the other hand, there exists a second type of communicative event or 'forms of performance' (Carbaugh, 1990: 160), which are less rigidly ordered. Certain rituals fall into this category, in that there exists a strict sequential ordering to the overriding structure of the ritual; however, within each step or phase, there exists less rigidity in what kinds of speech acts may occur when. Katriel and Philipsen (1981) analyzed the Communication Ritual, which they found to have four phases: initiation, acknowledgment, negotiation, and reaffirmation.

The ritual is linear in nature, in that each of these steps follows in order, and the goal of the ritual is for participants to formulate and ultimately solve a perceived relational problem. The more open nature of the act sequence lies in the flexibility *within* a phase; for example, it is known that during 'initiation', one intimate announces there is a personal problem that must be 'worked out' through communication (and for which the intimates must 'sit down and talk') (p. 78); however, exactly how and in what order the communicative acts occur within the 'initiation' phase remains flexible. Similarly, Katriel's (1990) study of the Griping Ritual formulates three phases of griping among Israeli speakers: initiation, acknowledgment, and termination. It is important to note that there are constraints in the ordering of the phases; however, there is less rigidity in the kinds of communicative acts that precede and follow each other within a phase. While the Communication Ritual has been shown to follow a linear pattern, the Griping Ritual follows a spiral pattern, 'proceeding from one "round" of talk to another' (Katriel, 1990: 109).

The act sequence of the *comical hypothetical* appears to proceed in four phases: initiation, acknowledgement, creating the imaginary, and termination. Much like the Griping Ritual, the *CH* follows a spiral pattern rather than a linear one. Due to its spiral sequentiality, there may be a number of embedded 'action chains' (Pomerantz, 1978) that appear in the *CH*, as participants choose from a number of conversational options within each phase.

Phase 1: Initiation. Research on storytelling has found that in order for a speaker to tell a story, it requires 'the suspension of the normal turn-taking system' (Levinson, 1983: 331). This is accomplished by the initiator making a bid for extended conversational space in order to tell the story; the actual telling of the story is conditional on the recipient's acceptance of the bid. In storytelling, such a bid may come in the form of a story announcement sequence; for example, 'Have you heard the one about the pink Martian?' (p. 323).

In the initiation phase of the *comical hypothetical*, a similar bid is made; however, the initiation move for a *CH* is more indirect than the above example.

Example 1

17	Pat:	But im<u>a</u>↑gine (.) whatchyou could do with one.
18	Claudia:	°mm hm°
19	Pat:	I mean(0.7) ah: I can walk away from this <u>o</u>↑ffice(0.6)
20		wit<u>h</u> (0.5) the birth certificate of a classmate of mine
21		who is deceased (0.7) and I wo↑uld know(.) their

In the above example, Pat (white female, 52) uses an imperative in line 17, 'But imagine', to initiate the creation of a hypothetical scenario concerning what a person can do with a stolen credit card. Although Pat's bid or initiation is in the imperative form, it functions as a request to the recipient, Claudia (white female, 31) to imagine with her, for a moment, what things would be like if the upcoming hypothetical were true.

In the following example, the initiation also uses the term 'imagine'; however, in this case, the initiation is formed as a question, which functions as an implicit request from the speaker for the recipient to imagine with her.

Example 2

1 J: okay, dear, so you overcooked it a little but can you imagine what it would've
2. J: been like if you had of- (0.3) completely for↓gotten it.
3. (1.8)
4. J: all we had these little (0.3) charred ↓nubbits.
5. (1.8)
6. V: charred?
7. J: ↓charred. Hmu-hmu-hmu-hu

In line 1, J (white female, 68) initiates the *comical hypothetical* by asking her husband, V (white male, 74), if he can imagine what would have happened had he completely forgotten the steaks he had been grilling. The question, 'Can you imagine?' serves here as an indicator that the speaker wishes to move the conversation from the realm of the real and the concrete (e.g. grilling steaks) to the realm of the imaginary or hypothetical (e.g. what *would* have happened had the steaks been completely forgotten).

An important feature of the *comical hypothetical*'s initiation is that the speaker often calls for imagination or wonder based on a real occurrence that has already happened and/or is already a topic of the ongoing conversation. In the data samples above, the real life occurrences are a stolen credit card in example 1, and an overcooked steak in example 2. In both instances, the topic has already been addressed and is then used to initiate the *comical hypothetical* by extending it into the realm of the imaginary.

The initiation phase does not, however, always begin with the request from a speaker to imagine a hypothetical world. In the following example, the group is discussing why L (white female, 36) has not asked for a raise at her job. J (white male, 43 and L's husband) is teasing L, when A (white male, 43) asks J why he doesn't ask L's boss for her. In line 16, J jumps directly into playing an imaginary character, thus spontaneously initiating the *CH*.

Example 3

15 A: =Why don't YOU go in and ask for her?
16 J: Okay (mimics walking like a wrestler with arms out to the side) "Listen,
17 bia:tch"
18 (group laughter)
19 A: "Show me the MONEY!"
[
20 J: "Show my lady the money!"
21 L: La:dy? Who's a la:dy here.

Phase 2: Acknowledgment. In storytelling, once the bid is made to tell a story, whether or not it gets told depends greatly on the recipient's response. The recipient may accept or reject the bid. If the bid is rejected, for example, there is no 'go ahead' (Levinson, 1983: 324), the speaker will most likely not tell the story for which the bid was made.

Our data has shown that the second phase of the *comical hypothetical*, the acknowledgment, can take one of two forms: appreciation signals or creative

additions. We borrow 'appreciation signals' from Sacks's (1974) work on jokes; appreciation signals are a discursive option for the recipient of a joke to display appreciation through laughter or other means. When jokes fail, it is often due to the recipient withholding appreciation signals.

Example 4

20. R: I wonder what our excursion would have been like if you came with us.
21. Ta: └Hmhum-hmha-ha-ha-ha
22. R: >we'd probably still be out there<.
23. Ta: UHU-hu-hu-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha┘
24. C: └Ukh:-he'd probably fallen in. what are you talking about.
25. Ta: └really↓┘

In Example 4, after R's (white male, 46) initiation of the *comical hypothetical* in line 20, 'I wonder . . .', Ta (white female, 39, and R's wife) acknowledges the initiation bid in line 21 by offering the appreciation signal of laughter. Ta's laughter indicates that she has 'caught on' that R is launching into a hypothetical and potentially funny scenario, and her laughter may even imply to R that Ta is open to or ready for R's upcoming utterances.

Laughter is not the only type of appreciation signal that can instantiate the acknowledgment phase. In Example 5, we see a different type of appreciation signal at work, namely F's utterance in line 14.

Example 5

9 M: My sleep is all off – I keep falling asleep on the couch=
10 F: =That's not good
11 (1.5)
12 M: This is where they'll find me someday. (2.0) probably dead.
13 (1.0)
14 F: Ni::ce.
[
15 M: Hhhe.hhhee.
16 F: He-he-he khm. The neighbors will report a ↓stench coming from the house
17 next door.=
18 M: =The way my neighbor's houses are, they wouldn't even notice.

In Example 5, M (white male, 41) complains to F (white female, 40, and friend of M) about his sleeping patterns, particularly that he has recently been falling asleep on the couch. After M launches the initiation of the *CH* in line 12 by creating an imaginary scene where an unknown 'they' will one day find M dead on his couch, F (after a 1 second pause) utters 'Ni::ce.' with elongated sarcastic intonation. F's utterance in line 14 acknowledges M's *CH* while simultaneously evaluating M's utterance in line 12 as a potentially inappropriate way for M to speak about himself.

When recipients utter appreciation signals in response to an initiator's utterance, the initiator is usually the one to continue the creation of the hypothetical scenario in a third turn. In a sense, an appreciation signal says to the initiator, 'I am listening' or 'I know where you're headed, and I think it will be

(is already) funny' (e.g. Example 4). However, an appreciation signal can also offer an evaluation of the *CH*'s initiation (e.g. Example 5). In both examples, the appreciation signal completes the acknowledgment phase. If the *comical hypothetical* is to continue, there appear to be three choices: a) the initiator (speaker 1) builds the hypothetical in subsequent utterances; b) the recipient begins building the hypothetical directly after uttering the appreciation signal; or c) a third party may build the hypothetical after the recipient's appreciation signal.

An interesting choice available to recipients in the acknowledgment phase is through the use of silence, or in Sacks's (1974) terms, a signal that a recipient is withholding appreciation signals. Within joke-telling, such a withholding can result in a 'failed joke'. Unlike the 'failed joke', the *comical hypothetical* that receives no acknowledgment may continue in subsequent utterances and ultimately end successfully (e.g. with recipients' laughter or recipients' co-creation of the hypothetical). The *CH* also differs from the canonical storytelling structure in a similar way. As previously stated, when speaker 1 makes a bid to tell a story, whether or not it gets told is dependent on the recipient's acceptance or rejection of the bid. Rejection of a storyteller's bid may come in the form of silence from the recipient. In contrast, the *comical hypothetical* that receives no acknowledgment, for example, silence, may continue to phase 3, creating the hypothetical world, despite the lack of phase 2, that is, acknowledgment.

Example 6

1. J: okay, dear, so you overcooked it a little but can you imagine what it would've
2. J: been like if you had of- (0.3) completely for↓gotten it.
3. (1.8)
4. J: all we had these little (0.3) charred ↓nubbits.
5. (1.8)
6. V: charred?
7. J: ↓charred. Hmu-hmu-hmu-hu

In the example above, J initiates a *comical hypothetical* in line 1 and brings the initiation phase to completion in line 2. In line 3, there is an opportunity for V to provide an appreciation signal; however, he remains silent. In line 4, J then takes to creating the imaginary (and launches phase 3) by herself, which is met by a 1.8 second gap until V performs a request for clarification in line 6 with the utterance, 'charred?' Thus, phase 2 may, at times, not exist; however, if there is no phase 2 (acknowledgment), speaker 1 may skip directly to phase 3, that is, creating the imaginary.

A second option within the acknowledgment phase is what we have named the 'creative addition'. The creative addition occurs when the recipient responds to the first speaker's initiation by immediately launching into the imaginary and creating an additional component of the unfolding hypothetical scenario. In this option, the recipient acknowledges the *comical hypothetical*'s bid by jumping in and co-creating the imaginary with the first speaker. There also exists the possibility of a third speaker offering a 'creative addition' immediately following speaker 1's initiation. The 'creative addition' resembles phase 3, creating the imaginary (which will be discussed in the next section), but it appears in the second turn of the speech event's structure.

Phase 3: Creating the imaginary. In storytelling, once the storyteller's bid has been made, and the recipient has accepted the storyteller's bid, the normal turn-taking system is suspended and discursive space has been created for the story to be told (Levinson, 1983). Phase 3 of the *comical hypothetical* resembles storytelling in that it is in this phase that the imaginary or the unlikely gets interactionally built, either by the initiator in multiple successive turns, or by the initiator and recipients together through a co-creation of sorts.

Example 7

20.	R:	I wonder what our excursion would have been like if you came with us.
21.	Ta:	└Hmhum-hmha-ha-ha-ha
22.	R:	>we'd probably still be out there<.
23.	Ta:	UHU-hu-hu-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha┘
24.	C:	└Ukh:-he'd probably fallen in. what are you talking about.
25.	Ta:	└<u>really</u>↓┘
26.	Sa:	[you are a dino]
28.	T:	the <u>la:st</u> time I was in a ↑<u>boat</u> (1.3) I spent forty years in th' wilderness. Oh, well.
29.		>that's a different story<.
30.	R:	we'd still be out and got violent and formed a secret society out there, we'd
31.	Ta:	└ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha
32.	C:	└he-heh-he-he-he-he-he
33.	R	we'd lived there until ahm=
34.	T:	=til Lewis and Clark met you [inaudible]

In example 7, R initiates the *comical hypothetical* in line 20, and Ta moves into the acknowledgment phase in line 21 by laughing, that is, displaying an appreciation signal. In line 22, R continues his journey into the imaginary with the utterance, 'we'd probably still be out there', thus moving into phase 3, creating the imaginary. In phase 3, interlocutors have various options in order to keep the *comical hypothetical* in a forward discursive motion. Ta signals appreciation by again laughing in line 23. Then C, a 39-year-old, white male who has yet to speak, provides a creative addition to the hypothetical by uttering, 'Ukh:-he'd probably fallen in what are you talking about'. The story has now moved from the group still being out in the wilderness to T, the target of the laughter, falling out of the boat into the water. T's response in lines 28–9 could be viewed as a 'po-faced' response (Drew, 1987), in that he does not help to co-create the imaginary world now offered; rather, he points to the past (e.g. 'the last time I was in a boat') and jokes about another, unrelated event (e.g. 'I spent forty years in the wilderness'), which may also be a biblical reference. This does not, however, stop the momentum of further creating the imaginary world already in discursive motion, for R continues in line 30 with 'we'd still be out and got violent and formed a secret society out there'. More appreciation signals of laughter follow from Ta and C in lines 31 and 32. R continues in line 33 with another creative addition referring to how long the group, now violent and in a secret society, would live in the wilderness. T offers another creative addition in line 34, which now invokes the historical figures, Lewis and Clark, meeting the group. It is important to note that at the time of this recording, a festival celebrating the Lewis and Clark expedition was taking place in this South Dakotan town;

that is, this creative addition in line 34 pulls specifically on local cultural context, which is part of the interlocutors' cultural competence, in order to aid in the building of the *comical hypothetical*.

The co-creative elements of phase 3 are rather easy to recognize. Speakers may choose to add to the imaginary world that is being discursively built and changed with each consecutive utterance. It should be noted that phase 3 may just as often be carried by one speaker, that is, the initiator, who (with the help of recipient appreciation signals) may spin an imaginary world through consecutive utterances, thus extending his or her turns considerably.

In building the imaginary, speakers may use various common relational (e.g. T's clumsiness) and cultural (e.g. Lewis and Clark's expedition) elements in order to weave their web of the unlikely. In example 7, T is obviously a target of much teasing. One might ask what makes this example any different from a normal tease. We propose that the difference between a normal tease and a *comical hypothetical* lies in its structure. Although the cumulative function of the utterances may be to tease T, the way in which this gets accomplished, that is, through building an imaginary world that gets more and more ridiculous, is quite different than a straightforward tease. In fact, as the imaginary world gets discursively developed, what may have originally functioned as a tease starts to shy away from this goal and with each utterance moves toward functioning quite differently, that is, as a solidarity building exercise among the group participants.[4]

In the analyses of the *comical hypothetical* data samples, we noted that an intrinsic component of phase 3 seems to be the use of what we will call the 'absurd extreme'. As in any well-told story, there is often a pinnacle or climax that catches the listener's attention. While building a *comical hypothetical*, there is most always a point where what has been only ridiculous up until then becomes an absurd extreme, that is, something completely and utterly unbelievable, highly unlikely, and at times almost cartoon-like.

Example 8

55. R: we have- we had one, one of our members was a Russian but we killed him for
56. S: └[whining]
57. R: food to save the rest of us.
58. Ta/T: └Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha

Example 8 is an extension of the *comical hypothetical* presented in example 7. The group has been discursively building the imaginary scenario for quite some time, when R proposes that the group, out of desperation, would kill the Russian member (also present) for food. Perhaps due to its connection to the extreme morbidity of this hypothetical scenario – a direct link to the cultural inappropriateness of the notion of cannibalism – this discursive move becomes the extreme or pinnacle of the *comical hypothetical*, for it is but a few utterances thereafter that the *CH* comes to an end.

In the next example, J (white female, 41) is talking to L (white female, 40) about her time spent teaching English in Tokyo, Japan. J tells the story of an older

Japanese man who came up to her and grinned in her face until she wanted to shove him.

Example 9

7	J:	I KNOW! >>And he just kept staring into my face with this stupid grin.<<
8		(0.5) At first it was funny and uh -- I'm like– I just want to shove him.
9	L:	◦That would have gone over well◦ khm.
10	J:	No. Re::ally. Hhe-he-he-he – can you just see it. This (.) freakishly tall
11		American is seen shoving this eh poor little old man down on campus=
12	L:	=straight to the local jail filled with with
		[
13	J:	with little men hungry for some fresh
14		American girl. hhhehe and soon they like me so much they decide to keep
15		me there forever.
16	L:	No one would be able to find you there (0.3) ever. ekh-ekh-ekh-ekh-ekh.
17		(1.2)
18	L:	Uhhhh: poo::ky uuh (in childlike voice) I'd find you – I don't know how.
19		I don't know where but I wouldn't let you rot over there.
20	J:	HHHHhhhhhhhhh God – I hope so=
21	L:	=I'd get a squad together and do a ↓Je:nny search.
22	J:	Hh.hhh.hhh.hh – well, thank you – that's good to know huh huh h hu huh

In this example both speakers co-create the *CH* by moving from one extreme hypothetical scenario to the next. After J expresses how she wanted to shove the man, she then moves to the initiation stage of the *CH* in line 10 by uttering, 'can't you just see it'. Thereafter, J (a very tall woman) hypothesizes that she would push down the poor little old man (line 11), to which L then replies that J would end up in a Japanese jail (line 12). In line 13, the hypothetical becomes even more absurd when J imagines in line 13 that the men in the jail would like her so much that they would keep her there forever. L fuels the flame by stating that no one would ever find J (line 16). The absurd extreme comes when L proclaims that she would not let J rot over there (line 19), and no matter what it took (e.g. getting a squad car to do a Jenny search), L would rescue J from her demise.

Phase 4: Termination. In storytelling, the story ending must be recognizable in order for the normal turn-taking machinery to once again automatically resume. Jokes also end recognizably with either a punchline, for which recipients' laughter is the sequential locus of the joke's end (Sacks, 1974), or when the ending returns interlocutors to the topic of the joke's focus (Jefferson, 1978), or when other recognizable ending sequences are used (Labov and Waletsky, 1966).

There seem to be two types of termination found in the data samples. We have named the first type 'call to contemplate the imaginary' and the second type 'sudden death'.

Example 10

108	Pat:	(0.6) uh it could look pretty prepohhsterous
109		.hhh comihhn across thuh.hhh the ((sniff) ba↑nk (0.2)
110		where some of these things are spe↑nt,(.) you know?
111	Claudia:	°Yeah°
112	Pat:	I mean jst,(0.4)think of it.(cough))

Line 112 represents Pat's termination of the *comical hypothetical* sequence. In uttering, 'just think of it', Pat calls the recipient, Claudia, to reflect on the wild imaginary journey just taken, which then marks a shift in the conversation for interlocutors to return to the real. The real, in this case, is either the previous topic discussed prior to the *CH*, or a new topic based in the everyday rather than the imaginary.

Termination can also occur by 'sudden death'. This is when the imaginary is halted by one of the speakers in order to return to the real.

Example 11

22. M: [banging sound] and if we need a place to put the ashes you know it looks like
23. it might make a nice (.) funeral urn and (.) then when we wanted to (.) ↑share
24. her a little bit with someone we get this we run the tap here and have a little bit
25. of her ashes come out of in a little cup and say Dave you take some back to
26. Tennessee Rachel you take some back to Michigan,
27. D: └I was
28. I was thinking it would be better for mine for the (2.0) my ashes
29. H: └What are ↑a:shes?
30. (2.1)
31. M: ↑what ↑what did you say?
32. D: It would be better for mine when the time comes. It's probably not yet not for a
33. while weeks but (1.0) months years (1.8) °who knows°
34. M: ↑°Oh°.

In lines 22–26, M (white female, 42) weaves an imaginary world in which a real-life samovar she has received has become an imaginary storage location for a deceased friend's ashes. The absurd extreme is reached in lines 24–5, when M explains that they could then share the ashes by pouring them out into little cups, similar to tea (for which the samovar is normally used). In line 28, D (M's husband, a white male, who is almost 20 years her senior) mentions that the samovar might better be used for his own ashes, thus referring to his own mortality. We cannot know how D meant this utterance to come across; however, in line 31, M requests clarification by uttering, 'what did you say?', which leads D to further explicate what he meant in line 28. He does so by explaining that his own death may be weeks, months, or years away, but that no one ultimately really knows when he'll die. This is followed in line 34 with M's much quieter '↑°Oh°'.

This example illustrates how a *comical hypothetical* can be stopped in its tracks with, in this case, a reference to a real-world event (D's death) that is most likely extremely troubling to his wife, M. One could speculate that D's utterance in line 28 was meant to be a creative addition to the ongoing *comical hypothetical* M had started. In line 31, M attended to D's utterance as either not having heard it or as not being able to believe what he just said. Hence, the termination of the *comical hypothetical* is sudden, the thread of which is broken in line 31.

It should also be noted, much like in a joke, that *comical hypotheticals* can end in shared laughter. Once the laughter has died out, the conversation often picks up where it left off, and the journey into the imaginary is traded for conversation about the everyday.

Example 12

51 W: yeah. it sha::tters all oveh the table=
52 G: =gla:ss splinters are in my chest.
53 (1.5)
54 W: hhhhehheheh= [
55 G: = hehheheh hehheheh (.) there's blood EVERYHWERE. See the
56 headlines? (.) ◦Couple dies due to lamp incident at local Denny's.◦
57 W: hehhehehe
[
58 G: Hahehehe hehhe
59 (1.5)
60 G: I'm so:::: ↓hungry
61 W: Yea, me too.

In example 12, W (white male, 43) and M (white female, 40) are commenting on a glass lamp that is hanging over their table at a local Denny's in Illinois. After G states that she hopes the lamp does not fall onto them, W initiates the *CH* in line 51 by imagining the lamp shattering onto their table. G both acknowledges the *CH* and jumps to creating the imaginary in line 52 by immediately adding a creative addition with the gory image of glass splinters going into her chest. The absurd extreme is reached in lines 55 and 56 with G painting the horrific image of blood splattering everywhere and the death of both interlocutors being reported in the news. The termination of the *CH* occurs in lines 57 and 58 when W and G engage in simultaneous laughter. After a 1.5 second pause, the conversation returns to the real-life circumstances of both speakers' hunger.

Discussion and conclusion

Our analyses have shown that the *comical hypothetical*, with its macro-structure and micro-interactional details, can indeed be counted as a unique conversational phenomenon set apart from, yet belonging to, the ongoing conversation. We have established that the *comical hypothetical* is neither a story nor a joke, rather it appears to lie at the nexus of these two interactional genres, while employing the imaginary as a vehicle. We would like to emphasize that much can be learned from a conversation analysis about those phenomena of communication that are too subtle and too context-bound to put their interactional mechanics on display without going deep into their sequential production. The above analysis has shown how the phenomenon of the *comical hypothetical* produced, sustained, and retired imaginary worlds in a collaborative and sequential manner. In the course of its discursive construction, the imaginary world exhibited a clear beginning (initiation), middle (acknowledgment and creating the imaginary), and end (termination), which was stabilized by the participants along the probable–improbable continuum.

We propose that the *comical hypothetical* may become a discursively created communal space for all participants who wish to engage in its imaginary world. At this point, it is difficult for us to assert the extent of this engagement. Because it has been recorded in various locations in the United States and has been

practiced by participants who are separated by mother tongues and formative cultures, we suggest that the *CH* be approached as symptomatic of American communicative behavior rather than restricted to it. In either case, more extensive and preferably comparative studies are required to establish the phenomenon's precise ecology.

On the macro-level, the *comical hypothetical* shows itself as a speech event for which the topical building blocks used by interlocutors stem from the ongoing conversation or situational context in the moment. There appears to be a marked shift from speaking about real-world events to speaking about the imaginary or unlikely. Within each phase of the *comical hypothetical*'s act sequence, a variety of discursive options are available as resources to the participating interlocutors.

A speaker marks the first phase of initiation by making a bid to create a hypothetical scenario with an utterance such as 'Just imagine . . .' The bid finds its starting point most often in a real-life object or a real occurrence that has already happened and is the topic of the ongoing conversation. Once the bid is made and initiation is underway, the second phase of acknowledgment appears to reveal itself in one of two forms: appreciation signals (Sacks, 1974) or creative additions. Thus, acknowledgment can be accomplished by a second speaker who either laughs or provides some type of utterance that displays listening behavior (e.g. mmhmm), which usually signals to the initiator to continue building the *CH* in a third turn. Acknowledgment can also be accomplished by a second speaker responding to the initiator's bid with her or his own creative addition to building the imaginary.

The third phase, creating the imaginary, is where the imaginary or unlikely get discursively co-created by interlocutors. Either the initiator continues to build the imaginary with multiple successive turns, or there is a back and forth with other interlocutors who share in the discursive construction of the *comical hypothetical*. During this phase speakers pull on common relational and cultural elements to create the unlikely. There is quite often a pinnacle or high point to phase 3 called the absurd extreme, where the participants have built up the *CH* to a point which is utterly unbelievable and highly unlikely.

The final phase, termination, has shown itself to occur in one of three ways: with a call to contemplate the imaginary, by sudden death, or shared laughter. In the call to contemplate the imaginary, an interlocutor wraps up the *CH* by suggesting the other interlocutors reflect on the wild imaginary journey just taken, which then marks a shift in the conversation for interlocutors to return to the real (e.g. 'just think of it'). The second option in the termination phase, sudden death, is discursively accomplished when a speaker suddenly and sometimes abruptly returns to the real before the *comical hypothetical* has had the chance to come to a more 'natural' close by a call to contemplate the imaginary or by the third option, shared laughter.

Evidence of the *CH's* macro-structure allows it to join the ranks of other ritualistic discourse, such as the Communication Ritual (Katriel and Philipsen, 1981) and the Griping Ritual (Katriel, 1990). It is important to note, however, that the *comical hypothetical* is unlike those speech events such as *brown-nosing* (Hall and Valde, 1995), which have a recognizable folk concept that names

them as a culturally identifiable type of talk. Fitch (1998) reports that the term *salsipuede*, which refers to the Colombian leave-taking ritual she studied, was not a native term. Fitch argues, 'The lack of a native term, however, does not in itself call into question the cultural significance of the action' (p. 184). The term *comical hypothetical* has been given to the phenomenon at hand by the researchers, rather than by the interlocutors who engaged in it. Participants, when faced with a description of the *CH*, were quick to acknowledge it as a type of talk with which they were familiar, albeit without a recognizable folk term with which to describe it. With the identification of this discursive phenomenon and the formulation of its macro-structure and micro-properties, future research may further explore interlocutors' own descriptions and understandings of this speech event.

Beyond the structural and content features of any ritualistic discourse lie the varied functions that such discourse serves. At this juncture, we propose that the comical hypothetical fulfills various cultural, social, and interpersonal functions. Participants in the *comical hypothetical* often pull on historical and cultural knowledge in order to discursively create the *CH*. Whether it be a biblical reference to 40 years in the wilderness (example 7), a reference to a popular film such as *Jerry Maguire* ('Show me the MONEY!' in example 3), or the formula for creating a newspaper headline (example 12), the participants not only display their knowledge of history and particular cultural artifacts, but also employ this knowledge for social and interpersonal means. At the same time, as interlocutors pull on historical and cultural resources to help build the *CH*, they simultaneously emphasize and reinforce those resources' weight and value within the cultural system.

When a speaker initiates a *comical hypothetical* with a stranger or acquaintance, she or he may be testing the interpersonal waters with the other. Should the recipient wish to show affiliation with the initiator, she or he may take a risk by jumping in and playing along. At the very least, the recipient may display appreciation signals for the discursive affiliative gesture extended by the initiator. In a sense, the *CH* is a culturally accepted way of bridging interpersonal distance with others. Certainly, speakers who successfully engage in the *CH* together express solidarity with one another during its creation. However, between intimates, the *comical hypothetical* may serve very different purposes. In many cases, it brings the interlocutors symbolically closer through their discursive co-creation and simultaneous utilization of the same cultural knowledge. It displays an understanding of who they are to one another as well as of their shared histories. In some instances, the *CH* can aide in problem solving between interlocutors. In other instances, it can serve to discursively discipline or even reprimand a group member, especially when interpersonal knowledge of that group member is used as fodder for creative additions to the *CH* by other group members.

For instance, example 3 does this kind of interpersonal work in several ways. On the one hand, J gently reprimands his wife L for not having asked her boss for a raise. After A (a friend of the couple) challenges J to go and ask for his wife's raise himself, J play-acts to L and others in the group just how an assertive

person would go in and ask for said raise. He does this by referencing common slang (e.g. 'Listen, bia:tch'), which elicits group laughter. Hence, J is chidingly 'teaching' L how asking for a raise gets accomplished. Once A offers a creative addition by quoting the famous line from the film, *Jerry Maguire* ('Show me the MONEY!'), J changes the famous quote to 'Show my lady the money!' With this second creative addition, J accomplishes varied functions at once. He displays familiarity with the referenced cultural artifact, that is, the film *Jerry Maguire*, and validates the film's cultural impact. In his willingness to engage in the *CH* by taking another speaker's previous utterance and making it his own, he displays an understanding of the present group's social dynamics. Finally, J's utterance displays affiliation with his wife by emphasizing their being a couple (e.g. 'my lady') during the mock confrontation with L's boss. Thus, all three functions – cultural, social, and interpersonal – are achieved within one *comical hypothetical* segment.

It is our hope that we have sufficiently argued for the *comical hypothetical* as a conversational phenomenon to join the ranks of both ethnographic and conversation analytic studies of discourse grounded in local cultural competence and conversational strategies. We understand the *comical hypothetical* to be a discursive phenomenon located between the genres of storytelling and joke-telling, while basing itself in the imaginary. Beyond its structure and content, we propose that the *CH* accomplishes varied cultural, social, and interpersonal functions for interlocutors. Future research of the *comical hypothetical* may point us to other categories of talk, such as verbal play (Sherzer, 2002), that could possibly give us more insight into its characteristics. We look forward to further ethnographic endeavors concerning the *comical hypothetical* that may help us to uncover more about the highly intricate, culturally distinctive ways that interlocutors recognize and co-create imaginary worlds to accomplish desirable and appropriate social functions.

NOTES

1. Here we understand syncretism methodology as the co-determining work of two or more related methods. As opposed to synthetic singularity, syncretic pairing leaves the two methods to their own analytical devices and paths. At the same time, expected are complementarity and mutual effects of the two methods. For the operational definition of syncretic, see Polkinghorne (1989).
2. Among many purposes for a story one finds doing relational work such as showing togetherness (Mandelbaum, 1987), performing and/or entertaining (Bauman, 1986), making arguments (Bennett, 1997; Tracy, 2002), revealing self and reflecting other (Shaw, 1997).
3. An interesting similarity between the *comical hypothetical* and the joke can be found in the study on po-faced receipts of teases by Drew (1987). Teasing, as a form of joking, can occur when a kind of innocent activity or category membership which is occasioned, usually in the teased person's prior turn(s), is then transformed in the tease into a deviant activity or category. Something which is normal, unremarkable, etc., is turned into something abnormal and therefore remarkable (Drew, 1987).

4. Although the scope of this paper did not allow a full excursion into the ends or functions of *comical hypotheticals*, the data samples point to such possible functions as creating solidarity, teasing, warning fellow interlocutors, and emphasizing the potential gravity of a real-life situation.

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