

ON THE NATURE OF “LAUGHABLES”: LAUGHTER AS A RESPONSE TO OVERDONE FIGURATIVE PHRASES

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Abstract

In this article I explore the relationship between laugh responses and the turns which they orient to. I consider whether it is possible to identify properties of the prior turns that the recipient may be orienting to in laughing. Thus, I begin by briefly exploring the relationship between laughter and humour in interaction. But I point to some of the difficulties in identifying what it is that makes some discourse humorous, and I argue that laughter is not simply a reaction to the perception of humour. Laughter should be considered as an action in its own right, the occurrence of which may have nothing to do with the presence of humour. Consequently, I consider the notion of the “laughable” and whilst I agree that “(v)irtually any utterance or action could draw laughter, under the right (or wrong) circumstances” (Glenn 2003: 49), I argue it is often possible to identify recurrent properties of turns treated as laughables. These properties concern the design, action and the sequential position of the turns. Thus, it seems that speakers draw from a range of resources in constructing laughables. I illustrate this by exploring a collection of instances of figurative phrases followed by laugh responses from telephone calls. I argue that in responding with laughter, recipients may orient to a cluster of properties in the prior turn. However, because laughter is an action with its own sequential implications, rather than simply a response to a prior turn, whether a recipient orients to a prior candidate laughable by laughing will depend on the nature of his or her contribution to the action sequence.

Keywords: Conversation analysis; Laughter; Laughable; Figurative expression.

1. Introduction

It might be thought that laughter, as a non-lexical component of interaction, is not subject to the same kind of tight ordering as talk is, but this article adds to the body of research that demonstrates that laughter in interaction is, in fact, highly ordered. It focuses on the relationship between laughter and its target: Laughter is heard as connecting to something, whether it is prior talk, prior laughter or smiling, or, less commonly, something external to the interaction. But the exact nature of this relationship has long been the subject of debate. Previous authors have sometimes sought to explain the occurrence of laughter by seeing it as arising from the presence of humour. But here I highlight some of the problems inherent in such an approach and instead focus on a range of properties of turns that may invite laughter, or at least make it appropriate as a response. I explore aspects of the design, action and sequential position of the target that make a laugh response relevant. As a consequence, I suggest that a variety of properties of turns can contribute to their being treated as making a

laugh response relevant. And, relatedly, that speakers may draw on a cluster of resources in constructing laughables.

The position of the laughter is important in identifying its referent or target. Where it connects to talk, the laughter usually follows that talk or occurs concurrently with it (Sacks 1974: 348; Schenkein 1972: 365; Glenn 2003: 49). The term “laughable” is used to refer to the target of the laughter (see Glenn 2003: 48-49). But what is it about an utterance that makes laughter an appropriate response? Two approaches to answering this question will be explored. First, an alternative approach to the one adopted here involves examining the previous turn with the assumption that if laughter is an appropriate response, then something about the prior turn(s) must be humorous. Thus, in section 2 I will review existing theories of humour that have attempted to identify features of humorous discourse that distinguish it from serious discourse (Mulkey 1988).

I argue that laughter in interaction is not only associated with humour. Furthermore, analysis of the current corpus suggests that any theory explaining the occurrence of laughter in interaction by virtue of a feature of the prior talk (such as the presence of incongruity) is in danger of overlooking the intricacies of talk-in-interaction, and the way that sequences in talk are the jointly negotiated and the produced accomplishment of the participants.

A second way of seeking to answer the question is to leave aside consideration of whether the turn responded to with laughter is humorous and instead concentrate on its design and the action of both the target and the laugh response. Attributes other than laughter in the prior turn may serve to make a response of laughter relevant, having to do, for example, with the delivery of the turn, the activity sequence or environment it contributes to and is situated in, or elements of its design. Thus, it is necessary to examine the previous turn to identify those aspects that the recipient may be orienting to in selecting laughter as an appropriate response.¹ I shall argue that turns responded to with laughter regularly display recurrent properties in terms of their design and sequential position. Thus, this provides a picture of the kinds of resources participants make use of in constructing turns that invite laughter.

In adopting this approach I am taking a somewhat similar one to that taken by Stivers and Rossano (2010) in their analysis of response mobilizing mechanisms. In analyzing how sequentially initial turns (such as announcements and assessments) mobilize response, they argue that “speakers mobilize response through the combination of multiple resources employed simultaneously: Through the social action a speaker produces, the sequential position in which it is delivered and through turn design features that increase the recipient’s accountability for responding” (p. 4). Ford and Fox (2010) also take a somewhat similar approach in exploring multiple practices for constructing laughables. They take a multimodal approach, considering a range of phonetic practices and particular activities (including exaggerations and contrasts) that speakers use in constructing laughables. They argue that “the production of “laughability”, if you will, is...co-produced through simultaneous practices of sound and bodily display...” (p.3).

¹ This is not to say that all laughter is occasioned by the prior turn or that all laughter is “appropriate”.

However, as well as focusing on the laugh response and the turn it follows, I also argue that it is necessary to consider the wider sequence in order to begin to fully understand laughables and the relationship between these turns.

2. Theories of humour, laughter and laughables

Traditionally laughter has often been seen as resulting from humour. There has been a tendency to "treat laughter simplistically as a response to humour and thus to imply a causal, stimulus-response relationship from humorous event to perception of humour to laughter" (Glenn 2003: 24). Psychologists, sociologists and philosophers have sought to explain why some locutions or texts are funny: To identify a feature of discourse (or the way certain texts are processed) to establish what it is that makes it humorous. Theories of humour have been divided into three types (Morreall 1983; Long and Graesser 1988; Glenn 2003). First, humour has been seen as a relief resulting from the dispelling of arousal or tension. For example, to Freud laughter restores balance following tension or conflict. A problem with such theories is that they cannot explain why some relief should result in humour and some in other reactions, nor can they distinguish between arousal experienced in humorous episodes from that in more serious experiences such as sexual arousal (Long and Graesser 1988). A similar criticism has been levelled at a second set of theories. These deem humour to originate from the perception of superiority when comparing oneself to others thought to be inferior. Again, however, they cannot explain all humorous discourse, for example, why some feelings of superiority should result in humour while others might result in pity or disgust (Glenn 2003).

A third set of theories has been more successful in explaining much humorous discourse. These revolve around the idea that humour involves the bringing together of two opposing "scripts" or "frames" (Koestler 1964; Raskin 1985) that result in an incongruity or "bisociation" (Koestler 1964). Incongruity is seen as a fundamental feature of humour by many theorists (see, for example, Attardo 1994). For instance, according to Mulkay (1988: 35) "incongruity is an essential and persistent feature of humour". In Suls' (1977) incongruity-resolution model the perception of humour is due to the recognition of an incongruity followed by its resolution. Central to this is the idea of a sudden shift between scripts or frames that results in a feeling of surprise and an attempt to solve the puzzle created by the incongruity by evoking a new understanding or interpretation of the discourse in question (in jokes this often involves finding another interpretation for a word or phrase which forms the joke's "locus" [Nash 1985]). But several disagree with Suls' notion that a single resolution is arrived at and instead see humour as deriving from the appreciation of "interpretative duality" (Mulkay 1988: 37; see also Long and Graesser 1988). Again, a weakness of these approaches lies in their inability to explain all humorous discourse: Why are certain incongruities perceived as humorous while others are not? The supposed element of surprise (Suls 1977) makes it difficult to explain why the same joke may be enjoyed more than once, or why people may laugh before the end of a joke having predicted the punchline (Long and Graesser 1988).

In support of these theories authors have mainly analysed standard jokes, but problems emerge when attempting to use them in the analysis of naturally occurring instances of humour. Turns at talk responded to with laughter often seem no more or

less incongruous than turns that are treated entirely seriously. No one feature, such as the presence of incongruity, appears, in any straightforward way, to characterise all (or even a majority of) turns responded to with laughter. In fact, attempts to analyse humour in talk reveal the situation to be far more complex. Simply identifying humorous discourse becomes problematic and thus laughter has sometimes been seen as indicative of the presence of humour. Ethnographic studies, for example, have used the occurrence of laughter as the basis for including a prior comment in a collection of humorous contributions (see, for instance, Coser 1960). But conversation analytic research into laughter in interaction has revealed that laughter is far more complex and recurrent than a simple response to humorous discourse. Drew's (1987) analysis of teases in interaction revealed that contributions that are designed to be non-serious recurrently receive no laughter from recipients. Further, laughter systematically occurs in environments other than speakers saying something humorous. For example, Jefferson (1984) has shown that it commonly occurs in troubles-telling. Troubles tellers laugh to demonstrate their resistance to the trouble - that they are able to take it lightly. Recipients do not laugh; they treat the turn as serious. In this environment the laughter is not a response to humorous discourse. In a study of laughter in Finnish doctor/patient consultations Haakana (1999, 2002) also identified instances where laughter comes, not from the presence of humorous discourse, but from patients' attempts to construct different kinds of delicate activities. Again recipients - in this case, doctors - do not respond with laughter. Thus, research demonstrates that there is no straightforward causal relationship between laughter and humorous discourse in interaction, and, in fact, much laughter in interaction does not arise from the presence of humour in any straightforward way.

Consequently, conversation analysts distinguish between laughter and humorous talk. Laughter is seen as an ordered component of interaction much like lexical elements. The term "laughable" has been introduced to refer to a contribution that is responded to by laughter, but there is no assumption that the turn being laughed at is necessarily humorous in some way. However, there is a close relationship between the laughter and the laughable. According to Glenn:

"The relationship between laughs and their referents defies consistent labeling, in part, because the term *laughable* glosses over an analytically problematic notion. Virtually any utterance or action could draw laughter, under the right (or wrong) circumstances. This fact dooms any theory that attempts to account coherently for why people laugh" (2003: 49)

Thus, research should no longer focus on trying to explain why people laugh, but instead on what action people are performing when they laugh.

"In such a conception we move away from the simple assumption that laughter follows humour, to a mutual constitution model that suggests that the occurrence of laughter marks its referent (usually retrospectively) as laughable - and, potentially, as humorous. Funniness becomes understood not as an inherent property of a message, or the internal state of a social being, but rather as a jointly negotiated communicative accomplishment". (Glenn 2003: 33)

Whilst there is no straightforward causal relationship between humour and laughter, it is often possible to identify recurrent properties of turns that are treated as

laughables. Laughter does regularly follow turns that display a range of components, design features and positions within the ongoing sequence. Thus, whilst it may, in principle, be true to say that any utterance could draw laughter, in practice participants who laugh generally appear to be orienting to one or more of a cluster of recurrent aspects of turns in treating laughter as appropriate.

In this article I base the analysis on extracts from telephone conversations, thus omitting the relevance of bodily practices. I examine a range of properties of turns that are responded to with laughter. When I say recurrent properties, I refer to the delivery and design of turns and their position in sequences. To illustrate this I analyse a collection of “overdone” figurative expressions responded to with laughter.² Analysis of these extracts shows that there are other resources besides the expressions that recipients may be orienting to; these include the presence of laughter in the turn containing the figurative phrase, and the action of the turn within the ongoing sequence.

Analysis of the current corpus suggests that it is possible to identify recurrent elements in turns responded to with laughter. But the relationship between the turn and laugh response is not a simple one: Although the excerpts presented here display exaggeration or are “overdone” (and, thus, one could argue, incongruous), there are other elements that recipients could be orienting to in laughing. Further, because conversation is not mechanistic, even if a recipient recognises the potentially laughable nature of a prior turn, they are not bound to laugh. I will show that, in some sequences the recipient may have good reason not to laugh.

Thus, the research presented here throws further light on what we mean by the term “laughable”. It suggests that, by treating a turn as laugh-relevant, recipients may be orienting to one or more of a range of properties and practices. And, relatedly, that there are a number of resources that speakers may use in constructing laughables. But it also shows that the relationship is complex. Understanding it requires analysis of the wider sequence in which these turns are embedded, the actions they perform and their contribution to the trajectory of the talk.

3. Laughter following figurative phrases

In the following extracts from telephone calls, turns with figurative expressions are followed by responses of laughter. I begin by considering whether it is possible to identify a connection between these phrases and the recipients’ laughter: In other words, whether the use of certain figurative expressions may be recurrently oriented to as making laughter appropriate.

(1)[Holt:2:2:5-6]³

1	Lesley:	I hope you don’t mind <u>y</u> our <u>c</u> onversations being re↓corded
2		this <u>t</u> elephone is bugged.
3		(0.2)
4	Bond:	↑ <u>Q</u> h ↓is <u>i</u> t?= _____

² This research derives from an extensive project using conversation analysis to explore laughter in interaction. I have several hundred instances involving laughter drawn mainly from telephone calls in a variety of informal and institutional settings. The excerpts presented here are drawn from a smaller subset (around 30 instances) involving a figurative expression and laughter (in the same turn or in a turn following the phrase).

³ Extracts are transcribed using the Jeffersonian system. See Sidnell (2010) for a key.

- 5 (0.2)
 6 Bond: ↑hə [ha ha ha[ha h[a ha ha ha
 7 Lesley: [Well- [K- [Kathrine's doing 'er thesis o:r or
 8 something on um
 9 Bond: Oh[that's right you told me she wz going to,
 10 Lesley: [speech.
 11 Lesley: Yes.
 12 Bond: Ye:s.
 13 (0.2)
 14 Bond: Oh we:ll
 15 Bond: → Down it's down f'posterity [hey,
 16 Lesley: → [£No STATE secrets,£=
 17 Bond: → =[hə]hə hə hə eh oh]
 18 Lesley: → =[hh]həh həh həh.hh] .hh Okay th[en,]
 19 Bond: [Y e]s .hh Well-
 20: Bond: ekhh-hu Le:mme know if you don't get that ballot
 21 paper'n I'll [(check[)]
 22 Lesley: [Yes. [O]kay

(2)[Holt:1:1:20]

- 1 Lesley: .hh Lovely thanks fringing,
 2 (0.3)
 3 Mum: Do I speak alright with my new dih- teeth in:?=
 4 Lesley: =ehhh!
 5 (.)
 6 Lesley:→ .hh £Ye(h)s yer coming over loud an'clea[r£
 7 Mum: [() good.
 8 Lesley:→ hheh huh .uh[hh .hh
 9 Mum: → [hu:h .uhh .uhh .uhh .uhh
 10 Lesley: .hh[h
 11 Mum: [Okay love,

(3)[Heritage:1:6:5-6]

(They are discussing cutting dogs' claws)

- 1 Ilene: You know you- you musn't cut it very fahr down, hh=
 2 Mrs H: =Yes.
 3 Ilene: You musn't cut it onto the bla:ck becuz it's li:ke
 4 cutting into are own quick.
 5 Mrs H: Yes of course ih ti[s,
 6 Ilene: → [En they'll scream blue murder 'f
 7 → y (h) d(h) th(h)a(h)[t
 8 Mrs H: → [.hih hih Y(h)eh ah well I've given
 9 ih up ez a bad job anywa[y.
 10 Ilene: [eh həh həh həh hih-n-hn-[n
 11 Mrs H: [You
 12 kno:w, h But l:look ah I wz (0.2) I'm s:sti:ll having
 13 a big pro:blem.
 14 Ilene: =Ah:;
 15 Mrs H: with my: sister's ba:ck.

In these extracts the turns preceding the laughter display certain regularities. First, in terms of their design, they are figurative expressions. Figurative expressions are

phrases that have a metaphorical meaning over and above the literal meanings derived from constitute words (e.g. "kick the bucket", "banging your head against a brick wall").⁴

Furthermore, the expressions in the current collection are not entirely well fitted to the ongoing talk. They are, in some sense, dramatic, exaggerated or "overdone". Thus, to refer to recording a phone call as "it's down for posterity" and "no state secrets" is to import expressions typically associated with more historically significant occasions. Similarly, "coming over loud and clear" is prototypically used in situations involving possible serious problems with communication rather than speaking with new false teeth. To refer to a dog objecting to claw clipping with "scream blue murder" is also to dramatise it in a way that is out of proportion with the event, using a phrase more commonly associated with situations involving more serious injury.

In being overdone these expressions are akin to exaggerations, and the relationship between exaggerations and laughter has been identified before (Drew 1987; Ford and Fox, 2010). It seems that exaggeration is a resource that is recurrently drawn on in the construction of laughables. Further, in importing expressions often associated with other contexts, speakers use another resource recurrently associated with laughables. In an analysis of interaction involving the purchase of lottery tickets in Finnish convenience stores, Haakana and Sorjonen (2011) found that customers would sometimes shift frames by invoking a different kind of institutional talk (e.g. submitting a pension application) in order to be playful. Thus, exaggeration and interdiscursivity appear to be recurrent resources for constructing laughables.

So, it is possible that, in laughing, recipients are orienting to the overdone nature of these figurative expressions. The fact that these expressions are followed by recipient laughter begins to suggest that recipients treat overdone phrases as laughable, and, thus, that these are a resource for constructing laughables. However, further evidence is required to demonstrate that it is the expressions (and not - or not just - other components of the turns) that recipients are orienting to. Thus, in order to explore the laughable nature of these turns and the overdone figurative phrases more fully, I examine three extracts in greater depth, each providing rather different kinds of evidence suggesting that recipients are orienting to the phrases as laughable.

I begin with extract (1) above. Here both speakers collaborate to produce turns that contain overly dramatic figurative phrases, and both orient to these as making laughter relevant by laughing together immediately following the second expression. In introducing this topic in lines 1 and 2, Lesley refers to the conversation as being "bugged". Other elements of the design of this turn also contribute to it sounding inappropriately official or overly dramatic, such as the somewhat formulaic "your conversations being recorded" (rather than, say, "our conversation", or even "I'm recording you") and the slow, deliberate delivery of this turn. Thus, it is this dramatic and exaggerated formulation of the announcement that Bond may orient to in her figurative phrase in line 15, "Down its down for posterity". Lesley then responds with another figurative phrase that also plays on this exaggerated portrayal of the significance of the action, "no state secrets". This is followed by shared laughter, so both participants orient to the prior turn or turns as laughables. Thus, they collaborate in producing similar objects - figurative phrases that portray the situation in an

⁴ For a fuller account of the meaning of the term see Fillmore et al (1986), and on their use see Drew and Holt (1988, 1998).

exaggeratedly dramatic way - before both laughing together. They both treat dramatic figurative expressions as appropriate in these slots, and they both, simultaneously, orient to them (or at least the final one) as making laughter appropriate.

A second type of evidence is provided by the next extract. Here, when a figurative expression that appears rather equivocal as a laughable is responded to with laughter, the speaker adds a second expression which seems designed to be more clearly laugh-relevant, retaining its dramatic nature.

(4)[NB:IV:9:3]

- 1 Emma: .hh H_{er} hu- u-her father in la:w's in the ho:spit'l so I don't
 2 know what the deal honey I've j_{is} rele:sed myself^v
 3 → everything I'm j_{is} going along wih th'ti:de.
 4 Margy:→ Yih-hih-huh? Hh-hhe:h [hhh
 5 Emma: [hhh
 6 Margy: [Well ('at's o-)
 7 Emma:→ [En the wind blow's'n ah'll go wih the wind blo:o:ows
 8 Margy:→ ihhhhh hOkhha(h)a(h)y
 9 Emma: .hhh Ah'll be dow:n a few minutes?

Emma has been briefly referring to problems involving her and her family. In responding with laughter to the expression “I’m just going along with the tide”, Margy may be orienting to it as perhaps slightly dramatic, though it may be somewhat equivocal as a laughable (it does not, for example, have laughter as a constituent). Interestingly, Emma then does another, more elaborate version in line 7. Thus, it may be that, having received a response of laughter (to the rather more equivocal first expression) Emma designs the second figurative expression to be more clearly laughable. She does this with animated intonation: “blo:o:ows” is extended and sung - it has modulating pitch. Thus she steps up the dramatic nature of the idiom, giving Margy another chance to laugh, which she does in line 8.

A third kind of evidence comes from the next extract where, following a non-laughing response to an expression, the producer of that phrase provides another opportunity for the recipient to laugh and thus orient to its laughable status.

(5) [Heritage:I:3:1-2]

(Ilene and Lisa are discussing grooming Ilene's dog)

- 1 Ilene I 'ean she's very tickelish ↓over the feet↓
 2 Lisa: Yeh the ↑f_{eet} weren't ↑t_{oo} ↑b_{ad} she didn't like gidding the
 3 knots ot beh_{ind}'er ears<.hhh wuh w-one one^v them wz
 4 Lisa: worse eh he- beh_{ind} 'er left ear there wz quite a big
 5 lu[mp ()
 6 Ilene [yYe:s well I got rid^v the other ↓one.
 7 Lisa Yah hhah hhah he[h heh]
 8 Ilene: [U h :]I wo:rked[‘n worked ‘n wor-]
 9 Lisa: [Yes you ca_h:n't y]you kih-
 10 Lisa: You ca_h:n't pull the[m a]_ll=
 11 Ilene: [°*u h e e*°[Yeh]
 12 Lisa: =.hh[↑e_hh heh]heh
 13 Ilene: [N o : .]
 14 Ilene: uhh heh he[.eh_h: :]
 15 Lisa [°he-he°

- 16 Ilene: Uh I got rid’v the other one cz[there wz a big lump the:re
 17 Lisa: [^o↓Yes.^o
 18 Ilene: too:.
 19 (.)
 20 Lisa: Uh yes well there wz only a little on[e there.’v]course]=
 21 Ilene: [M m : .]Ye:s.]=
 22 Lisa: =b’t[there wz a big one ([]) th’ left ear.]
 23 Ilene: [Ye:(s). [There wz a big one beh]nd the
 24 left ear yes. Yes, yes.
 25 (.)
 26 Ilene: [.hhh
 27 Lisa: → [Yeh ah I’ll tell you I’ll give you chapter’n verse,
 28 Ilene: → Right.
 29 Lisa: → ↑ehh heh heh[heh he-]hh=
 30 Ilene: → [U h : m]
 31 Ilene: → =Well now look d’you want me ti[h come over’n get her? or
 32 wha:t.

In line 27 Lisa produces a figurative expression that characterizes telling Ilene the details of the grooming in a way that is not entirely well fitted to the task: The expression refers to the Bible, and is overly dramatic for this event⁵. In line 28 Ilene responds to the expression with “Right”, thus not orienting to it as a laughable. This is followed by laughter from Lisa in line 29. It is possible that, finding that Ilene does not treat it as a laughable, Lisa tries to retrospectively constitute it as such by laughing here. Her laugh gives Ilene another chance to laugh. Instead Ilene turns down the invitation (Jefferson 1979) by overlapping the laughter with the beginning of arrangements to collect the dog. Here, then, when an overdone figurative expression is not responded to with laughter, the producer of the expression appears to treat laughter as absent by laughing herself in the third turn and thus producing a further invitation to laugh (Jefferson 1979).

In each of these three extracts then, participants orient to these slots as appropriate positions for producing an overdone figurative phrase, and laughter as being an appropriate response. In (1) both participants produce similarly dramatic figurative phrases before simultaneously orienting to these as laughables by laughing together. In (4), on finding that a rather dramatic figurative expression is oriented to as a laughable, Emma produces a second one of similarly dramatic nature which may be more explicitly intended to be a laughable, giving Margy a second chance to laugh. Finally, in (5), on finding that the figurative expression is not oriented to as a laughable, Lisa gives Ilene another chance to orient to it as such by laughing after Ilene’s serious response.

Thus, a possible target of the laugh responses in these extracts is a preceding overdone figurative phrase. Humour theorists might argue that such phrases are necessarily incongruous and thus, that the laughter is a result of the humorous nature of the preceding turns originating from the incongruity⁶. However, further analysis of these extracts reveals other possible candidates for the target of the laughter. This suggests

⁵ It may, at least in part, link back to Lisa’s portrayal of the dog’s extreme reaction to being groomed mentioned just prior to this extract – “You c’d hear’er in th’nex’county?”.

⁶ Considered in terms of the topic of the talk, these expressions can be seen as being somewhat incongruous in terms of their overdone nature, but viewed in terms of their action – summarizing the topic, bringing it to a close and inviting laughter, they are extremely well fitted.

that we would be premature to assume a simple relationship between overdone expressions and laughter. Rather, it indicates there are a cluster of properties that the recipient may be orienting to in laughing. Similarly, it suggests that selection of an overdone phrase by a speaker does not necessarily mean that they are inviting laughter.

Another property, concerning the design of the prior turns, is the inclusion of laughter or smile voice observable in some of the extracts here. Jefferson (1979) has shown that laughter can serve to invite reciprocal laughter: Laughter recurrently occurs as a response to an invitation made through laughter in the prior turn. Here is an extract for Jefferson's chapter.

[From Jefferson, 1979:81]

- 1 Ellen: He s'd well I am cheap he said, .hh about the big things.
 2 he says but not the liddle things hhhHA HA[HA HA HA
 3 Bill: [heh heh heh

Ellen laughs at the end of her turn and Bill treats this as an invitation by joining in after two beats.

Thus, for example, by laughing at the start of her turn in (3) above, Mrs H may be orienting to the laughter interspersing the words at the end of Ilene's preceding turn, treating it as an invitation to laugh by reciprocating.

(3)[Detail]

- 6 Ilene: [En they'll scream blue murder 'f
 7 y (h) d(h) th(h)a(h)[t
 8 Mrs H: → [.hih hih Y(h)eh ah well I've given
 9 ih up ez a bad job anywa[y.

Bringing this observation to bear on extract (2) suggests in fact, that the target of Mum's laughter in line 9 may not be the figurative expression, but the preceding laughter in line 8.

(2)[Detail]

- 6 Lesley:→ .hh £Ye(h)s yer coming over loud an'clea[rɛ
 7 Mum: [() good.
 8 Lesley:→ hh_eh huh .uh[hh .hh
 9 Mum: → [hu:h .uhh .uhh .uhh .uhh

In response to the expression in line 6, Mum produces an assessment without explicitly orienting to the laugh particle and smile voice in the previous turn. Lesley then laughs and Mum overlaps with reciprocal laughter. Thus, in Jefferson's terms, Lesley's laughter at line 8 is an invitation to laugh and Mum's laughter in line 9 appears to be orienting to that. Whether it also targets the expression in line 6, or other elements of the sequence (such as her question "Do I speak alright with my new di- teeth in:?") is impossible to pin down with certainty (both for analysts, and for the participants).

Thus, the presence of laughter in a turn⁷ raises questions about the target of the laugh response: Is it orienting to the expression, the laughter or to both? There is evidence in some of the extracts that it is not simply the presence of laughter or smile

⁷ Smile voice may also serve to contribute towards inviting laughter, see Lavin and Maynard (2001) and Haakana (1999).

voice in the turns preceding the laugh responses that are being oriented to by recipients. Another look at extract (4), for example, reveals no laughter by Emma prior to Margy’s response at line 4.

(4)[Detail]

- 1 Emma: .hh Her hu- u-her father in la:w’s in the ho:spit’l so I don’t
 2 know what the deal honey I’ve jis relea:sed myself’v
 3 → everything I’m jis going along wih th’ti:de.
 4 Margy:→ Yih-hih-huh? Hh-hhe:h [hhh
 5 Emma: [hhh
 6 Margy: [Well (‘at’s o-)
 7 Emma:→ [En the wind blows’n ah’ll go wih the wind blo:o:ows
 8 Margy:→ ihhhh hOkhha(h)a(h)y

The first expression is, perhaps, rather equivocal as a laughable (partly because it does not contain laughter). But Margy orients to it as such. The second expression is less equivocal partly due to its sing-song delivery, thus it may be more explicitly designed to invite a laugh response. However, it does not do so by having laughter as a constituent, instead, it retains the dramatic, and, possibly, rather exaggerated nature of the prior, emphasising this further through its delivery.

Thus, one possible candidate for the referent of the laughter has been explored - the use of figurative phrases, and, moreover, dramatic, exaggerated or otherwise overdone figurative phrases. Another candidate has also been pointed to - the inclusion of laughter in some extracts. However, a further regularity underlies the extracts here which may, at least in part, account for the laugh responses. In order to explore this, it is necessary to begin to consider the series of actions to which the turn including the figurative phrase contributes, and the action of the recipient’s turn and its contribution to the trajectory.

In each of the extracts in this section, the turn treated as a laughable and the laugh response constitute parts of a sequence whereby a topic is brought to a close. Following the two figurative phrases in extract (2), (lines 15 and 16 - “it’s down for posterity” and “no state secrets”), Lesley appears to initiate a pre-closing (line 18), while Bond overlaps by referring back to the reason for call. In (2) Lesley and her mum have entered a closing at the start of the extract, however, Mum then asks whether she talks alright with her new teeth. Lesley answers using the figurative phrase (“yes yer coming over loud and clear”), and closing-relevant talk is then reintroduced following the laughter (line 11). In extract (3) Ilene and Mrs H are discussing clipping dog’s claws. Ilene completes her advice about not cutting too much off with the figurative phrase in lines 6 and 7 (“they’ll scream blue murder if you do that”), Mrs H responds with another formulaic phrase (“I’ve given it up as a bad job anyway”), then introduces a new topic following Ilene’s laughter and her “you know”. And in (4), following talk about Emma’s family problems and the two figurative expressions, Emma initiates a pre-closing (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) in line 9.

In responding with laughter to the turns containing the figurative phrases, recipients may be orienting to the potential topic terminating action of the prior turn. Figurative phrases are recurrently associated with topic termination (Drew and Holt 1998). In fact, it is possible to represent the standard form that such topic terminations regularly take:

- 1→ Speaker A: Figurative summary
 2→ Speaker B: Agreement (or other expression of contiguity)
 3→ Speaker A: Agreement/confirmation
 4→ Speaker A/B: Introduces new topic
 (Drew and Holt 1998: 506)

The design of figurative phrases makes them useful devices for bringing topics to a close: Their generic nature contributes towards detaching from the empirical details of the topic. Thus, they recurrently act as summaries. Furthermore, they assess the prior matter: They act as summary assessments, linking back over multiple preceding turns. In so doing they also refrain from adding additional material, thus potentially indicating that the topic is exhausted.

In responding to such figurative expressions, Drew and Holt (1988: 507) found that recipients recurrently produce minimal responses such as agreements which “display their recognition that the idiomatic turn is somehow sufficient to terminate that topic; their responses are therefore designed not to say any more about that topic, but rather to exit from it”. In Holt (2010) I make a case for turns of laughter also contributing to topic termination in some environments. Like minimal agreements, they respond to a prior turn without adding further topical talk, thus conveying a willingness to contribute to closing. This seems particularly nicely illustrated where both participants share laughter (as in extract [1]), both appreciating the laughable, displaying affiliation, but refraining from adding to topical talk. So, when laughter is included as a possible response at stage 2 and 3 of the sequence outlined above, extract (1), for example, represents the standard form rather well. Both participants provide figurative summaries (arrow 1, lines 15 and 16), both laugh (arrows 2 and 3, lines 17 and 18) and both initiate transitions to other matters (arrow 4, lines 18 and 19-20).

(1)[Detail]

- 15 Bond: 1→ Down it's down f'posterity [hey,
 16 Lesley: 1→ [£No STATE secrets,£=
 17 Bond: 2→ =[h̩]h̩ h̩ h̩ eh oh]
 18 Lesley: 3→ =[hh]h̩h̩ h̩h̩ h̩h̩ .hh Okay th[en,]
 19 Bond: 4→ [Y e]s .hh Well-
 20: Bond: 4→ ekhh-hu Le:mme know if you don't get that ballot
 21 4→ paper'n I'll [(check[)]

Thus, examination of the sequence to which the turn responded to with laughter contributes, raises another contingency that the laugh response orients to. Recipients design their responses to further contribute to the ongoing trajectory of the talk. But at every point choices amongst numerous actions may be made, impinging on the direction of that trajectory. Thus, faced with a turn that potentially contributes to the closing of a topic and makes laughter appropriate, a recipient can laugh without adding further to the matter at hand and thus contribute to the closing. Alternatively, they can add further topical talk, produce their own figurative phrase, and so on, potentially prolonging (even just briefly) the topic-in-progress.

In the next extract the recipient of a figurative expression does not orient to it as a laughable (despite the interspersing laughter) but instead continues the topic, orienting to the serious matter referred to in the prior turn.

(6)Holt:M88:1:5:17

(Robbie and Lesley have both been supply [temporary] teachers at a local school. Robbie would like a full-time position and they are discussing whether there may be any upcoming opportunities. Portal Sage and Lord Ryding are both local schools.)

- 1 Lesley: W'l this is it. =you know they talk about things in th'
 2 cla:ss (.) in the sta:ff room you don't like to sa:y (.)
 3 uh pardon ↓what (0.4) you know hhh[heh ↑huh]
 4 Lesley: [M m : .]
 5 (.)
 6 Lesley: Mm:,
 7 Robbie: But there we are °°(so I'll just have stay a[()]°°
 8 Lesley: [Mm: .]
 9 Robbie: °°Mm[: ,]°°
 10 Lesley: [.tch.hhh Well I ↑think they: they're bound t'lose
 11 a class aren't they cuz if Bob Porter goes they're not
 12 going to replace him[: ,]
 13 Robbie: [↑Oh no↓ : . No: . becu:z uh the
 14 ↑num↓bers uh:r uh there's a[bout () fi]f]ty=
 15 Lesley: [a r e dwindling.]
 16 Robbie: =some[thing ()]
 17 Lesley: [Ye:s that's ri:ght,
 18 (0.2)
 19 Lesley: Ye:[s.
 20 Robbie: [That's th'same si:ze as uh: as Portal Sage.
 21 Lesley: ihYe[s: . Yes: .
 22 Robbie: [(Ye:s.)
 23 (0.2)
 24 Robbie: So we sh'll see: wh't ↓happens[you kno::w,]
 25 Lesley: [ih ↓Ye:s never]↓mind
 26 ↑one day,
 27 (0.5)
 28 Robbie: → Well I hope so yes I just get a bit despondent sometime
 29 → 'n think always a bri:desmaid never th'bri(hh)de heh
 30 → [huh ↑huh
 31 Lesley: [.t.hhhh ↑Well at Lord Ryding I don't think you've got
 32 a lot of hope fr awhi:le

In lines 29 to 30 Robbie produces a figurative phrase summarising how she feels about remaining a supply teacher rather than having a permanent position, in a dramatic and extreme way (as in “always” and “never”) followed by laughter. The expression comes in an environment where the participants have already started to move towards a possible close. In line 24 Robbie has already produced a rather formulaic, disengaged summary, typical of the kind of devices associated with topic closure. Lesley’s response maintains the potential topic closing trajectory (lines 25 and 26). Thus, a possible response to Robbie’s expression in line 29 would be reciprocal laughter by Lesley that may have contributed to topic closure. However, instead Lesley does not respond to the laughter, or orient to the expression as laughable in any way. She overlaps the post-

completion laughter with a continuation of the topic by addressing the matter of likely job prospects.⁸

In Holt (2010) I examined several instances where participants overlap a prior potentially topic-closing turn appended with laughter by producing further topical talk rather than reciprocating the laugh. Thus, it is possible that in not orienting to a candidate laughable by laughing in response (or acknowledging it as a laughable in some other way), a recipient may do so not because he or she is not aware of the possible laughable nature of the prior, but because he or she wishes to develop the trajectory in another direction, perhaps, continuing to address topical matters (Jefferson 1979). This underlines the fact that laughter is not a simple response to the presence of the perception of humour or even a laughable, but an action that contributes to the ongoing trajectory of the talk and has its own implications for next turns. Even on occasions where a recipient is alive to the potentially laughable nature of a prior turn, he or she may elect not to respond to the laughter, but orient to other elements of the turn.

The importance of considering the wider sequence of actions to which the expression and the response contribute is underscored by two of the extracts presented above. In the first, there may be good reasons for the recipient to respond with laughter to an equivocal laughable based on the wider trajectory.

(4)[NB:IV:9:3]

- 1 Emma: .hh Her hu- u-her father in la:w's in the ho:spit'l so I don't
 2 know what the deal honey I've jis relea:sed myself v
 3 → everything I'm jis going along wih th'ti:de.
 4 Margy:→ Yih-hih-huh? Hh-hhe:h [hhh
 5 Emma: [hhh
 6 Margy: [Well ('at's o-)
 7 Emma:→ [En the wind blows'n ah'll go wih the wind blo:o:ows
 8 Margy:→ ihhhhh hOkhha(h)a(h)y
 9 Emma: .hhh Ah'll be dow:n a few minutes?

The expression in line 3 is not explicitly constructed as a laughable. It does not have turn final or interspersing laughter. Also, the expression is not as clearly ill-fitted or overdone as some of the others in the collection. Further, it comes in a turn which is troubles-relevant, thus, laughing in response could be deemed to be troubles-resistant (Jefferson 1984). However, it does potentially close the topic, and there are good reasons for moving to a close. Margy has rung Emma to ask that she come over to help her “call back some numbers”. It turns out that Emma has guests, but she agrees to come as soon as they leave. Margy then raises the issue of a phone call Emma has to make as a possible obstacle to her coming (straight) down. This leads Emma to briefly talk about her current family problems before the closing shown in the extract above. Thus, analysis of the preceding talk suggests a reason for Margy treating this rather equivocal laughable as making laugh-relevant as she moves towards closing, letting Emma return to her guests before getting together.

⁸ A reason why Lesley continues to address this topic may be that she treats Robbie's turn as part of a troubles-telling or perhaps a self-deprecation. In the former case not laughing may contribute to showing receptiveness to the telling. In the latter case laughing might imply agreement with the self-deprecation. However, it is interesting that Lesley's turn at lines 31 and 32 is not reassuring in that she says she does not think there is likely to be a position at one of the schools discussed.

In extract (2), analysis of the more local environment shows the impact of the sequence on the laugh response.

(2)[Holt:1:1:20]

- 1 Lesley: .hh Lovely thanks fringing,
 2 (0.3)
 3 Mum: Do I speak alright with my new di- teeth in:?=
 4 Lesley: =ehhh!
 5 (.)
 6 Lesley:→ .hh £Ye(h)s yer coming over loud an'clea[rɛ
 7 Mum: [() good.
 8 Lesley:→ hheh huh .uh[hh .hh
 9 Mum: → [hu:h .uhh .uhh .uhh .uhh
 10 Lesley: .hh[h
 11 Mum: [Okay love,

It was noted above that Mum does not initially respond to the expression with laughter but with “() good”. Thus, she orients to Lesley’s turn as an answer to her prior question (line 3) first. It is only after Lesley’s laughter in line 8 that she also laughs. It may be that where a “serious” action is projected by either a turn preceding the potential laughable (e.g. a question), or the laughable itself, that recipients tend to orient to that either alone or first.

These observations underline the fact that there is not a simple relationship between a potential laughable and the response. Turns constituted as laughables may not be oriented to as such, and turns that are highly equivocal may be responded to with laughter.⁹ In understanding these patterns it is not enough to focus just on the laughter and the turn it follows. Rather it is necessary to explore the sequence in which these turns are embedded.

4. Conclusion

In sum, then, analysis of laughter in interaction reveals a complex picture. The laugh responses are not a simple stimulus-response to a prior humorous turn. In the extracts analysed here, a variety of candidates are apparent that the recipient may orient to in laughing. These include the preceding figurative expressions that are exaggerated, dramatic or, in some sense, overdone. Thus, it could be possible to argue that these are incongruous and that the presence of the laughter arises from the incongruity. But other properties may also be oriented to by recipients, including the presence of laughter or smile voice in the preceding turn. Furthermore, by selecting a laugh response, the recipient contributes to a particular trajectory. In the extracts here, laughing can display willingness to bring the topic to a close. Laughter is not just a reaction to a prior turn, it is an action in itself that appreciates the prior, treats it as laugh-relevant and contributes to a particular action sequence inherent within the prior turn (such as moving towards topic closure).

The analysis presented here has implications for our understanding of what constitutes a laughable. As has been suggested, it is not possible to offer a simple

⁹ In Holt (forthcoming) I consider the relationship between laugh responses and turns that are not explicitly built as laughables, rather, they are contributions to complaints.

definition of what we mean when we say a turn is a laughable. However, my research lends weight to an approach that sees speakers constructing laughables by drawing on a range of resources. Some of those suggested by researchers include overdone expressions, exaggeration, contrasts, incongruity, interdiscursivity, phonetic practises and other multimodal features (Haakana and Sorjonen 2011; Ford and Fox 2010). Thus, for example, a turn that contains an overdone idiomatic expression, has turn final laughter and potentially closes a topic, may be highly likely to be responded to with laughter provided, of course, the recipient wishes to collaborate in the closing and not extend the topic, or add their own idiom, etc.

This also has implications for our understanding of laugh invitations. Jefferson (1979) demonstrated that laughter in a prior turn can invite subsequent laughter. She also pointed out that there are other techniques by which laughter is invited. But many turns in interaction with laughter as a constituent are not responded to with reciprocal laughter, and turns without laughter as a constituent are regularly responded to with laughter. The current research suggests that whether a turn is viewed as a laugh invitation or not may be dependent on a cluster of aspects having to do with the design, delivery, action and sequential position of the turn, including the possible inclusion of laugh particles, or turn-final laughter, as well as the trajectory of the talk. Turns characterised by several elements recurrently associated with laughables may be more likely to be seen as inviting laughter, and therefore as a noticeable absence if not forthcoming.

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