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CHAPTER 3

An Exercise in the Transcription and Analysis of Laughter

Gail Jefferson

*The witness, who was the best drill-instructor in the
Guards, bawled out Montanus's alleged obscenities
at the top of his voice, not slurring over the most
obscene words or phrases, and refusing to let himself
be cried down by the shocked protests of the senators.*

Robert Graves, *I Claudius*

INTRODUCTION

I take it that when we talk about transcription we are talking about one way to pay attention to recordings of actually occurring events. While those of us who spend a lot of time making transcripts may be doing our best to get it right, what that might mean is utterly obscure and unstable. It depends a great deal on what we are paying attention to. It seems to me, then, that the issue is not transcription per se, but what it is we might want to transcribe, that is, attend to.

In various of his unpublished lectures Harvey Sacks addresses the issue of what we might want to attend to. He proposes that the social sciences have tended to view a society as "a piece of machinery" which generates "very few orderly products," where then "much of what else takes place is more or less random." He notes that such a view results in a "concern for finding that data generated by the machine which *is* orderly," where such a concern tends to focus on "what are in the first instance known to be 'big issues'," and to ignore "that which is terribly mundane, occasional, local, and the like."

Sacks offers as a possible alternative that "whatever humans do can

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be examined to discover some way they do it," and that "wherever one happens to attack the phenomenon one is going to find detailed order." That is, he concludes, "one may alternatively take it that there is order at all points." And if that is so, "then the detailed study of small phenomena may give an enormous understanding of the way humans do things, and the kinds of objects they use to construct and order their affairs" (from unpublished lectures, Spring 1966, Lecture 33, pp. 2-3).

The question then becomes whether sociology can hope to deal with the details of actual events.

Having that interest in mind . . . I tried to find a body of material that would have the virtue of permitting us to see whether it was possible, and, if it were possible, whether it was interesting.

So I started to work with tape-recorded conversations, for the single virtue that I could replay them; that I could transcribe them somewhat and study them extendedly, however long it might take. The tape-recorded materials constituted a good enough record of what happened, to some extent. Other things, to be sure, happened, but at least what was on the tape had happened.

It wasn't from any large interest in language, or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied, that I started with tape-recorded conversation, but simply by virtue of that I could get my hands on it and I could study it again and again.

Therefore, the kind of phenomena I deal with are always transcriptions of actual occurrences in their actual sequence. But my research is about conversation only in this incidental way, that conversation is something that we can get the actual happenings of on tape and transcribe them more or less; i.e., conversation is simply something to begin with. . . . But the specific aim is, in the first instance, to see whether actual single events are studyable and how they might be studyable, and then what an explanation of them would look like. (from unpublished lectures, Fall 1967, General Introduction, pp. 7-9)

Thus, transcription is one way we try to "get our hands on" actual occurrences in order to study social order in fine detail. The crucial point is that we are, in whatever ways we go about it, trying to proceed by detailed observation of actual events. And as Sacks points out, there is a certain advantage to that procedure.

In that the kinds of observations I make involve catching some details of actual occurrences, then we can come to find a difference between the way we proceed and one characteristic way that social science proceeds, which is to use hypotheticalized, proposedly typicalized versions of the world as a base for theorizing about it.

I want to argue that however rich a researcher's imagination is, if he uses hypotheticalized-typicalized versions of the world he is constrained by reference to what an audience, an audience of professionals, can accept as reasonable.

That might not appear to be a terrible constraint, except when we come to look at the kinds of things that actually occur. Many of the objects we work with

. . . could not be successfully used as a base for theorizing if they were urged as imagined.

We can then come to see that a warrant for using close looking at the world as a base for theorizing about it is that from close looking at the world we can find things that we couldn't, by imagination, assert were there. One wouldn't know that they were 'typical'. One might not know that they ever occurred. (from unpublished lectures, Fall 1971, Lecture 1, pp. 1-4)

The following exercise may be seen as a demonstration of some of the foregoing points; that is, that the detailed study of small phenomena can be useful and informative, that the results may be orderly, that without "close looking at the world" one might not know such phenomena exist, and that the absence of a range of phenomena from the data base upon which theories about the social world are built can be consequential. As Sacks notes, such "debarring of things that actually occur presumably affects the character of social sciences very strongly" (from unpublished lectures, Fall 1971, Lecture 1, p. 2).

THE TRANSCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF LAUGHTER

Participants to conversation and students of conversation find it both reasonable and adequate to describe laughter by noting that it has occurred and not much more. So, for example, participants to conversation report on the occurrence of laughter as follows.

(1) (Trio:2:II:5)

→ Pamela: He ran up to 'er en she jus' ran up to im en siz what's happ'n what's aa-w'the kids were all lau:ghing about it.

(2) (MC:I:16)

→ Philip: I thought that wz so funny I told my wife. She wz lau:ghing? (0.3) She(h)rea(h)ll(h)y lau(hh)ghed,

(3) (Labov:BG:2)

Annette: I says I w'like to have some ni:ce, fresh, pardon the expression horseshit. hhmh! huh_{huh} huh huh, 'hhh]
 → Dorothy: Well they die:d laughin.
 Annette: Well they die:d laughin.

While for other activity types, one may alternatively name the activity (e.g., *He insulted me*) or quote the utterance (e.g., *He said 'you dumb jerk'.*), we do not find as an alternative for *He laughed* things like *He said 'ahh ha ha heh heh heh'*. Rather, laughter appears to be among the

activity types that do not require, nor lend themselves to reporting of their particulars. And students of conversation, preparing their materials for analysis, produce transcripts accordingly. Laughter is named, not quoted, as in the following fragments.

(4) (Soskin, 1963)

- Jock: You splash me (chuckling) once more and you can sit back here.
(It splashes again)
- Roz: I'm sorry, Honey. Whoops. (Laughs)
- Jock: (Laughs)
- Roz: (Laughs) Really, Jock, I'm doing the best I can.

(5) (Haley, 1963)

- Jones: I've got lovesickness, secret love.
- Smith: Secret love, huh? (Laughs)

(6) From one of our early transcripts, GTS:I:1:61, 1965)

- Roger: Alright now that you've finished fistfighting and telling dirty jokes what's buggin ya.
(5.0)
- Roger: I give up, what's bugging me. hehhh
- Several: ((light laughter))
- Al: Say! That's it!

Such a procedure, while unquestionably adequate for a range of purposes and illuminating of a range of phenomena, can also obscure interesting features of interaction. A glimpse of what might be obscured can be gotten by examining two transcripts of the same segment of conversation. The earlier one provides the description that the utterance is produced through bubbling laughter (see arrow):

(7) (GTS:I:1:14, 1965)

- Ken: And he came home and decided he was gonna play with his orchids from then on in.
- Roger: With his what?
- Louise: heh heh heh heh
- Ken: With his orchids. [He has an orchid-
- Roger: Oh heh hehheh
- Louise: ((through bubbling laughter)) Playing with his organ yeah I thought the same thing!
- Ken: No he's got a great big glass house-
- Roger: I can see him playing with his organ hehh hhhh

The second transcript provides some particulars of the relationship of the bubbling laughter to the utterance (see arrow).

(8) (GTS:I:2:33:r2, 1977)

- Ken: An'e came home'n decided'e wz gonna play with iz o:rchids. from then on i:n.
- Roger: With iz what?
- Louise: mh hih hih huh
- Ken: With iz orchids. =
- Ken: = Ee_z got an orchid-
- Roger: Oh: [hehh_h h a h 'he:h_h 'heh
- Louise: heh huh [h_h PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ Q(h)R'N
- ya:h I_h thought the same
- Roger: [uh:: [hunhh'hh'hh
- Ken: [Cz ee_z gotta great big_h gla:ss house_h]=
- Roger: I c'n s(h)ee
- Ken: = [()
- Roger: = [im pl(h)ay with iz o(h)r(h)g'(h)n 'uh

The focal utterance, as rendered in fragment (7), ((through bubbling laughter)) *Playing with his organ yeah I thought the same thing!*, is compatible with a notion Goffman (1961) calls 'flooding out.' That is, while someone is attempting to talk, laughter cannot be contained and invades the talk. This is a notion shared by participants to conversation. So, for example, in the following fragment, difficulty in hearing the punchline of a dirty joke is accounted for in terms of uncontrollable laughter.

(9) (Frankel:GS:20, simplified transcript)

- Kate: The American doctor says th(hh)et's no(h)thing, we've transpl(h)ant(h)ed uhd(h)a di(h)ck fr'm C(h)alifornia tuh Wa(h)shing_hton Dee:: Cee-ee,
- Sara: Uh-tha_ht star-
- Sara: I didn't HEAR yuh Ka::y,
- Mary: It's d(h)ifficult wh'n she gets t'the punchli:ne sh'can't help lau:gh
- Kate: It's we've urry tr- we've transs- tra(h)nsplanted dieg fr'm Keh- 'hhhhh fro:m: Ca:luh-
- Sara: A wha::t?

Kate: [A di:ck.
 Mary: [A di:ck.
 Sara: [UH!H!
 Kate: from California t'Washinun D(h)ee Cee he screwed the whole hng(h)untryhee-hee-hee

Many instances of conversation are compatible with such a notion. For example, the final utterance of fragment (9) might be seen as a prototypical instance, the final word distorted and punctuated by laughter, the final sound giving way to a burst of laughter: *hng(h)untryhee-hee-hee*. Following are a few more instances of this giving way to laughter.

(10) (Frankel:US:I:23:r)

Mike: ih wz in my hand I wz ready tuh throw it up against the wahaw haw haw haw 'hnh

(11) (Goodwin:AD(b):7:r)

Bart: Wuhdjih say ab(h)out mih-hih-hee-hee

But in the focal utterance as rendered in fragment (8), *PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ O(h)R'N ya:h I thought the same*, we find a very different configuration, and in that configuration the possibility of an altogether different approach to laughter. Specifically, we might wonder if, on this occasion, laughter in the course of talk is not flooding out but has been put in. While the early transcript proposes that the entire utterance is produced through bubbling laughter, the second transcript shows that the laughter is present in and only in a discrete segment of that utterance; in the saying of an obscenity. The rest of the utterance is free of laughter. And we can notice that this is not a unique occurrence. For example, in the following fragment, high school kids are being interviewed about their games and rhymes.

(12) (Labov:Quadro:A1061)

Int: (say) catch a nigger by the toe?

→ Resp: Ye::ah. At's 'd they'd say catch a n(hh)i(hh)gg(h)er by the toe. 'hh! If he hollers let im go.

Again, it is in, and only in, the tender component of this utterance that we find a burst of laughter.

Once we have the specific placement of laughter as a possible phenomenon, we can begin to examine it as a methodic device. Earlier we noticed that laughter in the course of talk can account for difficulty in hearing what is being said. We might now notice that what is actually being said, as rendered in fragment (8), is something like *Playn wiz orn*, not the perfectly clear *Playing with his organ* as shown in fragment (7).

First of all, there are two distinctive elements present in the utterance: laughter and distortion. While the two elements regularly occur in combination, they are not inseparable. Occurring in combination, the presence of laughter can account for the presence of the distortion, not, for example, as a matter of the speaker's reluctance to say the words he is saying and thus in fact not-quite-saying the words, but as a constituent feature of flooding out, of uncontainable laughter invading and incidentally distorting the speech, incidentally making it not-quite-said and difficult to hear.

Secondly, rendering the utterance difficult to hear can set a task for its recipients. That is, *Playn wiz orn* is an object that may specifically require, rely upon, and refer its recipients to their own guilty knowledge in order to analyze out of the distorted utterance what is being said (for a similar phenomenon see Jefferson, 1978). In effect, then, the early transcript is doing the recipients' work and, by so doing, obscures the fact that such a task has been set and the methodic ways in which that has been done.

Earlier it was noted that the laughter is present in, and only in, the saying of the obscenity. In this particular case, we might wonder if not only the presence of laughter but also its nonpresence is methodic. In contrast to the instances characterized as compatible with the notion of flooding out, that is, fragments (9)–(11) in which the talk can be seen to give way to laughter (e.g., *he screwed the whole hng(h)untryhee-hee-hee*), here we get further talk with no laughter in it: *PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ O(h)R'N ya:h I thought the same*.

The entire utterance turns out to be a particularly elaborate and explicit version of a standard format by which a recipient, repeating a prior utterance, acknowledges a prior speaker's authorship and marks accord with that utterance. The base format is [Repeat + Acknowledgment Token]. For example:

(13) (GTS:II:2:73)

→ Al: See we gotta have the broad here cause₁she- she unites us.
 Ken: ₁heh
 → Ken: She- she unites us, yeah.

(14) (Frankel:HB:II:4)

Pat: ez soon ez he said the do:gs'r okay somehow I c'd handle
 → the whole thing₁.(Y'know?)
 Penny: ₁The whole thing yeah.

The format becomes particularly interesting when it is used in circumstances in which, were the acknowledgment token not present, the issues

of accord and authorship might be problematic. So, for example, in the following fragment, a repair is proposed to be, for all practical purposes, no more than a repeat.

(15) (Friedell:Alt:37)

Sheila: WHICH ONE'S the one thet he marries the girl en she die:s in the car wreck.

→ Hank: °ehho° That's:::: On'er (1.0) On Her Majesty's::: Service er:::

→ Sheila: On Her Majesty's Secret Service [°thet's right°]
Hank: [°Secret S e r v ice yeah.°]

In this case, simultaneous with the acknowledgment token *that's right*, which attributes correct authorship to and marks accord with prior speaker, that speaker repeats the repair-relevant segment and produces the acknowledgment token *yeah*, which attributes authorship to and marks accord with his coparticipant.

In fragments (16) and (17), the acknowledgment token proposes that a next utterance by a recipient constitutes, in effect, a repeat of something that the prior speaker did not actually say, but had so strongly projected that the recipient is to be seen as merely doing the actual saying of it.

(16) (Valdez:Alt:5)

Claire: It's bad enough when'e, when he uhm, (0.3) tells you how much to make but when 'e tells you what tuh cook.

→ Martha: then it's really bad yeah.

(17) (GTS:III:62)

Louise: My father's six foot two feet, he's large, an' he's a very s-
Ken: [ehheh]

(1.0)

→ Ken: st(hh)able person yea(hh)h

With *PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ Q(h)R'N ya:h I thought the same . . .*, we arrive at something rather more complex, and thus perhaps something that warrants the explicit utterance appended to the acknowledgment token. Here, the speaker is not to be seen as saying something, but as reporting a thought she had; a thought she now sees that a coparticipant also had, that is, a shared thought; a thought that would have remained but a thought had that coparticipant not done activities which indicated that he was thinking the very thing she is saying she thought, too. Notice that while multiple recipients can and do respond simultaneously, here, only one of them initially responds, and it is only thereafter that the one who later proposes she 'thought the same thing' gives utterance.

Ken: An'e came home'n decided'e wz gonna play with iz o:rchids.
from then on i:n.

→ Roger: With iz what?

→ Louise: mh hih hih huh

In multiparty conversations, other participants can and do respond to a *What?* by one recipient of a prior utterance, as, for example, in fragment (9):

Kate: we:'ve trans- tra(h)nsplanted dieg fr'm Keh-'hhhhh
fro:m: Ca:luh-

→ Sara: [A wha:::t?]

Kate: [A di:ck.

→ Mary: [A di:ck.

In the case at hand, following *With his what?*, we do not get such a contribution as *With his organ!* nor an announcement of having thought the same thing at this point, but, rather, laughter.

Elsewhere (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1977) it has been noted that in the environment of an impropriety laughter is recurrently and systematically "on the way to" implicating its utterer in the impropriety (in this particular case, laughter seems to demonstrate that Louise has heard an obscenity), but, in itself, does not (and sometimes problematically does not) unequivocally provide that demonstration. Louise has not responded immediately, and the response, when it comes, is equivocal. The proposal that she thought the same thing is, then, both an admission and a claim that she independently heard an obscenity on the occurrence of *play with his orchids*.

What is being proposed with this utterance is complex and interactionally delicate. Although she is first to explicate the thought (explicate it more or less, that is, with *playn wiz orn*, which relies upon and refers coparticipants to their own resources in order to hear it), and although she is admitting independent arrival at the obscenity, she is not the first contributor to its gradually emerging explication. It may, then, be no happenstance occurrence that the explicit obscenity is distorted, and accountably distorted, with the presence of laughter, and that the complex and delicate proposal about that obscenity is produced with utter felicity, free of the laughter that can make an utterance difficult to hear.

Thus both the presence and nonpresence of laughter in this utterance appear to be accomplice to the doing of some particular activities. And both the presence and nonpresence are precisely bounded by, and perhaps specifically placed by reference to, these activities. The laughter is started,

sustained, and terminated with particular aptness, given the activities underway.

Laughter, then, may not always be a matter of flooding out, to be accounted for as something that happens to a speaker such that he *can't help lau:gh*, but can be managed as an interactional resource, as a systematic activity that warrants and rewards more than a naming of its occurrence, but close attention to just how and where it occurs.

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