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# A Technique for Inviting Laughter and its Subsequent Acceptance Declination

Gail Jefferson

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*Jefferson has extended the study of conversational interaction to laughter. She has worked out transcription procedures and notational symbols which have enabled those working with tape recorded materials to advance their analyses based on high quality transcriptions. Examination of her essay on laughter will show that basic to the study of laughter is such a well-developed and precise transcription and notational system. Prior to Jefferson, no studies of the organization of laughter in interaction can be found in the literature. It is clear that the close attention to and hearing of tape recorded interaction gives the analyst access to previously unnoticed regularities.*

*The paper focuses on one of several ways in which a participant may invite laughter, the placement, by the speaker, of a laugh upon completion of an utterance. Subsequent activities are examined to discover how the recipient may accept or decline the invitation to laugh.*

In looking at laughter in conversation, I have used a collection of transcripts which capture some of laughter's details. In this paper laughter is considered as an activity to which one participant may invite another or others—an invitation which may be accepted or declined. I shall focus on one of several techniques by which laughter is invited—a *post-utterance completion laugh particle* by that utterance's speaker—and recipient activity subsequent to that particle will be examined for its acceptance/declination import.

Initially we can suppose that an utterance can have a range of possible responses, and for some utterances laughter may be among them. We can observe that some utterances which we might intuitively understand to be candidates for subsequent laughter get laughter, and get it in a particular way: *speaker himself indicates that laughter is appropriate, by himself laughing, and recipient thereupon laughs*. It is this sort of sequence of events which I'm pointing to with the formulation "invitation to laugh and acceptance."

The following two fragments are dramatic instances of such a sequence of events, since in each an utterance reaches completion, there is a pause, at some point in the pause prior speaker offers laughter and recipient thereupon laughs.

- (1)  
 Dan: I thought that wz pretty outta sight didju hear me say'r you a junkie.  
 (0.5)  
 Dan: hheh heh  
 Dolly: hhheh-heh-heh
- (2)  
 Joyce: Cuz she wz off in the bushes with some buddy, tch!  
 (0.7)  
 Joyce: eh h h h h h h h h!  
 Sidney: Oh(hh)h hah huh!

In the following fragment a similar invitation/acceptance sequence is produced without a pause. Speaker starts to laugh just after utterance completion, and recipient thereupon laughs.

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

To get a sense of the interaction which can be involved in laughter's occurrence we can contrast these fragments to one in which laughter is produced on a *volunteer basis* by recipients. And we can observe in that fragment a source and warrant for the volunteer laughter's occurring just where it does—a source which is also present in fragment (3). In fragment (3) there is a straightforward contrast pair available: "the big things"/"the liddle things." In this next fragment there is also a contrast pair available: "git outta dih mood"/"git outta dih cah." In this next fragment that contrast pair is used as a locus for recipient laughter; i.e., given the unit that has gone before ("git outta dih cah"), the occurrence of the subsequent unit ("git outta dih mood") is recognized and responded to as it is being announced—the point of the joke is clear at that moment and laughter is volunteered then and there.

Preceding the utterance we'll focus on there is a story being told. The transcript is simplified here, displaying only the story components:

- Mike: There's Rastus settin'the ca:r . jis froze. yihknow? . . . She sz. Ra::z's whutsa mattuh witchoo. . . She sid- you better hurry on up. Fore I git outta de mood. She says.

Then:

- (4)  
 Mike: He says. I gotta git outta dih mood befo' I c'n git outta d i h ca::h  
 Gary: A:h ha ha  
 Curt: U-huh-huh

The point at which these recipients have placed their response is not random; it has elsewhere been described as a *recognition point* (see Jefferson 1974), and is a legitimate and expectable place for recipient to respond in the course of an ongoing utterance.

Given the possibility of systematic recognition-point response, a place for such an activity can be located in fragment (3), roughly somewhere in the vicinity of "... but not the liddle. . . ." This can then be treated as a locus for recipient response and recipient can be observed as maintaining silence through that space, specifically in contrast to responding then and there.

Furthermore, we can look at fragment (3) in comparison to fragments (1) and (2) and see that, similar to those cases, recipient does not start up upon utterance completion but upon prior speaker's laughter. And if it is noted that prior speaker's laughter starts as a breath which is equivocal as to its character—i.e., may be a laugh onset or may be simply a postutterance exhalation ("[hhh]HA")—fragment (3) begins to approach fragments (1) and (2) in terms of the presence of a postutterance pause. A display which does not treat the breath as an interactional event looks very much like cases (1) and (2).

Ellen: . . . but not the liddle things.

(•)

Ellen: HA HA HA HA HA

Bill: | heh heh heh

Clearly, then, a recipient laugh which follows utterance completion and a pause and laughter by the prior speaker is quite a different matter than a volunteer, recognition-placed laugh. While the latter has no explicit interaction between speaker and recipient, the former has a little sequence in which the speaker invites laughter and the recipient accepts the invitation; i.e., the laughter is generated at some distance from and independent of the utterance itself.

Another technique for inviting laughter can be briefly examined. Speaker constructs a laugh-specific recognition point by inserting particles of *within-speech laughter* into his utterance. And the recipient can treat such a particle as providing a recognition point, a locus for recipient laughter, and can accept the invitation to laugh then and there. Three fragments will be shown, each of which has an additional feature: the party who will be recipient of the within-speech laughter is, until that point, observably in serious pursuit of topical matters, and that pursuit is abandoned at the moment within-speech laughter occurs and recipient produces laughter. (Utterance parts subsequent to laughter are deleted.)

(5)  
K: But going sou::th.  
F: Et the end of Harbor  
Bouleva(HH)rd,  
K: | ahh ha::ha::ha::

(6)  
M: I, Edna you know I didn't—  
M: You know—  
E: || Hell you know I'm on  
ret(H)i | ehh ye(h)h h m h' h m h' h m h

(7)  
B: Dju watch by any chance Miss International  
Showcase las'night?

E: N:no I didn', I wz reading my—  
B: | You missed a really great

E: pro(H) | O(hh)h i(h)t wa(hh)s? =  
E: = ehh heh heh heh!

Now recipients of a candidate laughable utterance do not always laugh. A question is, how do they *not* laugh, since, for one, silence at a recognition point, at completion, post completion, or in some pause after completion, does not foreclose the possibility of laughter, but instead may systematically generate a pursuit of laughter by speaker, a pursuit that may eventuate in recipient laughter. One intuitive warrant for such a pursuit by speaker is that recipient may specifically be *awaiting* an invitation to laugh, may find that the utterance itself is equivocal as to its laughability and may require a warrant by the speaker, an assurance that laughter is appropriate here, so that recipient may indeed go ahead and laugh.

It appears, then, that the order of alternative responses to a candidate laughable is not organized as freely as one might suppose; i.e., the issue is not that *something* should occur, laughter *or* whatever else, but that *laughter* should occur, on a volunteer basis *or* by invitation. In order to achieve a no-laugh response to a prior utterance, the recipient must do more than refrain from laughing at any "now," but must act, at some "now" to terminate the relevance of laughter.

An obvious solution is for recipient to start talking at a "now" in

which he might otherwise be laughing or awaiting an invitation to laugh.

Talk will observably *replace* both laughter and the silence which may be awaiting an invitation. Crucially, talk can revise the order of alternatives present so far. It is not that, having so far not laughed voluntarily, recipient may now be brought to laugh; other matters altogether are relevant and operative. And, routinely, the "other matters" are pursuit of topical issues present in the candidate laughable utterance.

That is, recipient does not simply refuse to laugh, but, while declining to take up one aspect of the utterance (its status as a candidate laughable), he does take up another aspect (its topical import). Roughly, the utterance is not killed off, it is served as a *sequentially implicative* object and turns out to have generated subsequent activity, although perhaps not the activity intended by its speaker. The order of relevant alternatives, then, is revised from [Volunteer Laughter. . .or. . .Invited Laughter] to [Laughter. . .or. . .Topical Pursuit].

At this point I'll focus on pursuit of topic as a technique for terminating laughter's relevance; specifically as a technique for dealing with an invitation to laugh that has been offered just post-utterance completion.

Here is a series of fragments in which an utterance reaches completion without recipient laughter and speaker appends an object which is either clearly or equivocally a particle of laughter—i.e., is clearly or equivocally a postcompletion invitation to laugh. For each we can observe that recipient starts to talk, and to talk by reference to topical matters in the prior utterance, and does so immediately after speaker clearly or equivocally starts to laugh.

(8)

James: I don't mind eh pullin'em but he comin at me-dat needle's what I can't stand.

Vic: HAH Use- Tellim ga:s.

(9)

Gene: So that shook the old (h)house(h)hold up fer a(h)whi(h)le heh

Patty: imagine. Oh yes I c'n

(10)

Mike: Wud is dat. ((The astrological sign Sagittarius))

(0.9)

Vic: Uh:::ih-ah-ih guy widda bow'n arrow enna half en a:sss. 'hh A half en a:ss of a ho::sss he h

Mike: Yeh but wuddih they call it

(11)

Natalie: U(h)nfortunately he lives in Van Nuys, ehhm.

Edna: lzzee unencumbered?

(12)

Bee: So the nex'cla: ss hh! 'hh fer an hour en f'fteen minutes I sat there en I watched his ha:n(h)ds hh hh

Ava: Why what's the matter with him.

(13)

Natalie: en there I sit with all these (h)young fellas, I fel'like a den mother. 'hhh

Edna: Are you the oldest one'n the class?

In each fragment, whether the utterance is intuitively a candidate laughable or contains markers by speaker (such as within-speech laugh particles), recipient does not start to laugh within or at completion of that utterance. Furthermore, the laugh-declining speech which recipient *does* provide occurs at a very slight but observable distance from the utterance's completion point. It should be noted that recipients/next speakers can and do start up directly upon an utterance's completion point, and, for example, that such startings are a routine locus of overlap; that is, at a possible completion point a recipient starts to respond, and it turns out that that point was merely a *possible* completion point, not the actual completion point, current speaker continuing the utterance with syntactically fitted next utterance components. (See Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). The product can be a collection of at-completion "false starts" by recipient.

- (14)  
 Penny: An' the fact is I- is- I jus' thought it was  
 so kind of stupid =  
 Janet: → Y-  
 Penny: = [I] I didn't even say anything =  
 Janet: → Eh-  
 Penny: = [I] when I came ho:me.

Or for example, routinely "tag terms" (questions, address terms, etc.) are overlapped by recipient/next speaker starting directly on the utterance's otherwise obvious completion.

- (15)  
 Bert: Uh you been down here before, havenche.  
 Fred: → Yeh.  
 (16)  
 Desk: What is your last name, Lorraine,  
 Lorraine: → Dinnis.

That is, while speech can and does start up directly upon completion point of an utterance, in the fragments pertaining to declined invitations to laugh (8-13), speech starts up just a bit after completion. And it may not be just somewhere just a bit after, but specifically after the speaker of the prior utterance has recognizably started to laugh, or at least made a sound which might potentially turn into laughter.

- James: ... can't stand. + HAH  
 Vic: → Use ...  
 Gene: ... fer a(h)whi(h)le + heh  
 Patty: → Oh yes ...  
 Vic: ... of a ho::sss. + he,h  
 Mike: → Yeh but ...  
 Natalie: ... in Van Nuys, + ehhm.  
 Edna: → lzzee ...  
 Bee: ... his ha:n(h)ds + hh hh  
 Ava: → Why ...  
 Natalie: ... den mother. + 'hhh  
 Edna: → Are you ...

## Inviting Laughter

Now a speaker can have grounds to suspect that recipient is disinclined to laugh (e.g., if the utterance contains some markers and/or specific invitations to laugh and recipient has bypassed them), and can produce his postcompletion invitation attending the possibility of recipient's declining. The fragments shown initially for recipient's positioning of utterances which contain no laughter and which address topical matters in candidate laughables will now be examined for speaker's work vis-a-vis his just-started pursuit of laughter.

A speaker can be prepared to relinquish pursuit if recipient does not immediately accept. For example, in fragment (9) the speaker who has appended a laugh invitation turns out to have appended but a single laugh particle which stops simultaneously with the onset of recipient's declination/pursuit of topic. The invitation is a mere suggestion, following a series of within-speech laugh particles recipient has bypassed.

- (9)  
 Gene: So that shook the old (h)house(h)hold  
 up fer a(h)whi(h)le heh  
 Patty: → Oh yes I c'n  
 imagine.  
 Gene: Y'know, a:nd uh I think Jill's, realized  
 that hell maybe ...

Note that all pursuit of laughter is abandoned and prior speaker now follows recipient's pursuit of topic with more topical talk.

On the other hand, speaker can be prepared to counter recipient pursuit of topic with pursuit of laughter. The following two fragments occur in a multiparty setting, which can be relevant to speaker's pursuit of laughter; i.e., there are others present who might take it up even if this sequence's co-participant/recipient does not.

- (8)  
 James: ... dat needles what I can't stand.  
 HAH, HAH, H, AH HAH!  
 Vic: → [Use] - [Tellim ga:s. =  
 James: 'hh Huh?  
 Vic: Tellim gass.  
 (0.4)  
 James: Uh- No I don't go with gas  
 y' know I wi- I will take it.

- (10)
- Mike: Wud is dat.  
(0.9)
- Vic: Uh::: ih-ah-ih guy widda bow'n arrow  
enna half en a:sss. 'hh A half en a:ss  
o f a ho:::sss. =
- Mike: [Is that-]
- Vic: = he h -he:h (h)uh w(h)uddevuh,  
Mike: [Yeh but wuddih they call it] =
- Vic: duh hell 'e i(h)::s,  
Mike: what izzit the ra:m?] =
- Vic: 'hhh!  
Mike: = [[Saggitarius's uh ra:m?  
(\*)
- Vic: No. Ra:m is, ram is uh:: a ram. Yihknow  
wid ho:rns.

In each of these competitions held in multi party settings, speaker and recipient engage in competitive overlapping talk and the competition terminates with no other parties joining the laughter and with speaker relinquishing the pursuit of laughter and taking up topical talk in response to the recipient.

An alternative consequence for multi-party settings is that others will join in the laughter. The following fragment has as an additional feature the fact that there are two separate topics under way: (1) placing bets on the weekend's football games and (2) diagnosing a rash. A participant of the football talk breaks off to do a joke about the rash. The post completion invitation to laugh is quickly countered, not by serious talk about the rash, but by serious talk about the football bets, by the other participant to that topic. The fact of two ongoing topics will be simply asserted, and the transcript will start at the point one member of the football conversation places a remark about the rash.

- (17)
- Bill: Yeah Mom. Diaper rash.  
(\*)
- Bill: → hh,hnhh  
Sam: → 'I'll give yih th' Gi ants-  
Bill: → [bet it  
Gloria: [HEH HEH
- Bill: is!  
Gloria: [HUH. HUH. HE:H. HE:H HA:H A:HH-'hh]  
Lorrie: [heh heh [he:h]  
Bill: [hnh]he::h heh 'hnnhhhh ]

One nice detail here: although Bill's pursuit of laughter competes with the attempt to set up a bet, it uses the language of that topic: "I bet it is!"

This case contains an instance of a postcompletion invitation to laugh which is in the first place equivocal. Such objects, while they are recognizably not speech and while they contain some of the characteristic sounds of laughter, are not definitively laughter but could be: a breath (exhaled or inhaled), a throat-clearing, a cough-onset, etc. Should recipient(s) accept the invitation, *then* these sounds can be followed by sounds which retroactively formulate the initial sounds as having indeed been the start of a laugh. Such minimal-equivocal invitations are routinely used, both by current speakers and by a first-responding recipient in multi-party conversation. For example:

- (18)
- Roger: You:: are what dey refer to in rougher  
circles as a chick'n shit. =
- Roger: = hhh,hhehh  
Ken: [heh:heh heh
- (19)
- Jeff: en Ramsbach's in there lyin there with a  
smoke,  
(\*)
- Jeff: 'hh,hh ehhhh  
Vana: [aaahhh!

(20)

Al: better getta good price fer me.  
(0.6)

Ken: hhh hheh heh heh

Louise: / hehhh heh heh heh

(21)

Ben: "Pwitter O'Toole."  
(\*)

Bill: 'hh hh hheh heh

Ellen: / eh heh heh

Should others decline to laugh, then the equivocal sound may be terminated, and remain just a breath, throat-clearing, etc., or may be followed by more sound which retroactively formulates the prior as definitely not laughter. The remainder of the fragments initially shown to illustrate recipient starting to talk just after an invitation or possible invitation to laugh has begun, are, as well, instances of minimal-equivocal invitations.

(12)

Bee: So the nex'cl:ass hh!'hh fer an hour en  
f'fteen minutes I sat there en I watched  
his ha:n(h)ds hh hh'hhh

Ava: / Why what's the  
matter with him.  
(\*)

Bee: 'hh t!'hhh He keh- he doesn' haff uh-full  
use uff hiss hha-fin:gers

(13)

Natalie: en there I sit with all these (h)young  
fellas, I fel'like a den mother. 'hhh, hh

Edna: / Are  
you the oldest one'n the class?  
(\*)

Natalie: Oh:: w- by fa:r.

Some small vestige of the fact of actual competition, although it has been reduced in its displayed features, is the occurrence of the token-of-special-interest "Oh::". Massively, such tokens and other expressions of special interest in another party's talk appear at resolution of competition for the floor and/or for the direction the talk will take, and are part of doing the relinquishing of a heretofore competitive act. Here are two examples:

(22)

Louise: How s- How s- ( )-  
Roger: / Theh wantuh git me in  
the r-swing a'thing hnh  
(\*)

Louise: How-How old were you wny'first went.  
Roger: / By th'time I'm nineteen'm a  
genuine neurotic. heh!  
(\*)

Louise: How old were you when y'first went,  
(\*)

Roger: → Oh:: I'd say about, thirteen,

(23)

Natalie: Course I don't know whether it's that, er  
just that we're just- completely bogging  
down et work, 'hhhhm =

Natalie: { =er what a waytuh- waytuh ta::ke, ]  
Edna: / [Oh::: well [evrybody's sa:d.]

Natalie: my finals?  
(\*)

Natalie: hhh! huh, huh 'hhh!

Edna: / finals. → Oh::! Howjuh do with yer

In our final instance, speaker not only produces an equivocal invitation, but after recipient's declination via serious pursuit of topic, further reduces the possible formulation of the postcompletion noises as an invitation to laugh. This she does by producing a phrase which, although subsequent to completion of recipient's utterance, ties back to and is continuous of her own prior utterance. Thereafter she responds to recipient's utterance.

- (11)  
 Natalie: U(h)nfunfortunately he lives in Van Nuys,  
 eh[m].  
 Edna: / Izzee unencumbered?  
 (.)  
 Natalie: / works out there, =  
 Natalie: / = Yes, he's living, with his aunt . . .

We might see this fragment as a version of a particular overlap-remedial technique: a party who has been overlapped and has dropped out, starts to talk again at completion of the overlapping utterance, and provides a continuation of the overlapped talk from the point it was cut off. For example:

- (24)  
 Roger: / I happen tuh wear bufoo jeans  
constantly.  
 (0.3)  
 Ken: / Well,  
 (.)  
 Roger: / → Even in-  
 Ken: / So do I now,  
 (.)  
 Roger: / formal occasions, y'know? hheh hh!

Furthermore, a party can successfully propose that an utterance was interrupted although there was no overlap involved, by constructing a continuation of the otherwise completed utterance. For example:

- (25)  
 Louise: / Twelve and a half years old and I- seven-  
 teen and a half and we look the same.  
 (2.0)  
 Ken: / You know, my brother and I have come  
 to one a- mutual agree=  
 Ken: / ment that- that we-  
 Louise: / She's taller than I am, too.  
 (.)  
 Ken: / She is? She's taller'n you?

And note another version, here, of the competition-relinquishing token of special interest.

That is, in fragment (11), the one who offered a minimal-equivocal invitation to laugh which was overlapped by serious pursuit of topical talk, retroactively proposes that recipient's pursuit of topical talk was "interruptive" of speaker's own intention to go right ahead and pursue topical talk.

## Conclusion

Laughter can be managed as a sequence in which speaker of an utterance invites recipient to laugh and recipient accepts that invitation. One technique for inviting laughter is the placement, by speaker, of a laugh just at completion of an utterance, and one technique for accepting that invitation is the placement, by recipient, of a laugh just after onset of speaker's laughter.

Declination of an invitation to laugh is not achieved by recipient silence, but can generate a pursuit of laughter by speaker, that pursuit eventuating in recipient laughter.

In order to terminate the relevance of laughter, recipient must actively decline to laugh. One technique for declining a postcompletion invitation to laugh is the placement of speech, by recipient, just after onset of speaker's laughter, that speech providing serious pursuit of topic as a counter to the pursuit of laughter.

Speakers can expect, and can collaborate in or compete with the declination to laugh, and it appears that the distinction between two-party and multi-party conversation can be relevant for speaker's treatment of a recipient's declination; i.e., in two-party conversation decliner is the only potential co-laughing, while in multi-party situations there are others present who may take up laughter.

Crucially, whether recipient accepts or declines and whether speaker collaborates or competes, the fact of a proffered invitation and its subsequent treatment does not, in these materials, emerge as a conversationally explicit issue in its own right, as it always potentially can and occasionally does. For example:



(26)

Roger: Well it struck me funny.

(1.0)

Al: HA, HA-HA-HA

Ken: hh

Roger: Thank you.

(27)

Bill: That wz a jo:ke people,

(•)

Bill: That wz-

Ellen: Yeh.

(•)

Bill: That- En yer spoze tuh smile.

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## Data Sources

I produced all the transcripts which appear in this paper, and where noted, others worked with me. In those cases where a collector is named, special appreciation is marked.

The materials are described by instrument-type (in person or telephone), by number of parties (two- or multi-party), age and sex of participants, general situation, and place and year collected.

## Fragment #

( 1 ) Two-party in-person, young man and woman, neighbors, after an interchange with two young men. Philadelphia, Pa., 1973. Collected and co-transcribed by Dan Rose.

( 2 ) Two-party telephone, elderly woman and young man, former neighbors. Orange County, California, 1970.

( 3 ) Multi-party, family. In this fragment, mother and son. Newport Beach, Ca., 1970. Collected by James Schenkein.

( 4 ) Multi-party, three young men with their wives and children at a backyard picnic. Ohio, 1973. Videotape. Collected and co-transcribed by Charles and Marjorie Goodwin.

( 5 ) Two-party telephone, young man and woman whose children are friends. Newport Beach, Ca., 1968.

( 6 ) Two-party telephone, middle-aged woman and young woman friend. Newport Beach, Ca., 1968.

( 7 ) See (3) above.

( 8 ) Multi-party, a group of men gathered at a neighborhood upholstery shop. Brooklyn, New York, 1970. Collected and co-transcribed by Richard Frankel.

( 9 ) Two-party telephone, a divorcee and a married boyfriend. Los Angeles, Ca., 1968. Collected by JoAnne Goldberg.

(10) See (8) above.

(11) Two-party telephone, middle-aged woman and young, recently divorced woman friend. Same extended corpus as (6) above.

(12) Two-party telephone, two college girls, formerly close friends. New York City, N.Y., 1970.

(13) Two-party telephone. Same participants as (11) above, but different phone call.

(14) Two-party telephone, two middle-aged women, second of three consecutive calls about a possibly interesting event. Los Angeles, Ca., 1967.

(15) Two-party telephone, two men. Same extended corpus as (6) above.

(16) Two-party telephone, fire department personnel and young woman caller. Anchorage, Alaska, 1964.

(17) Multi-party, family. Santa Barbara, Ca., 1975. Collected and co-transcribed by Michelle Weiner.

(18) Multi-party, teenage therapy group. Los Angeles, Ca., 1964.

(19) Multi-party, interview with high-school kids. Philadelphia, Pa., 1973. Collected by William Labov et al.

# **Everyday Language**

## **Studies in Ethnomethodology**

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