A Technique for Inviting Laughter and its Subsequent Acceptance Declination

Gail Jefferson
Inviting Laughter

(3) Ellen: He’s well he said I am cheap he said, hh about the big things he says but not the fiddle things, hhhHA HAHAA HHA

Bill: hehehehe

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 occurring just where it does—a source which is also present in fragment (1). In fragment (3) there is a straightforward contrast pair available: “the big things”/“the fiddle things.” In this next fragment there is also a contrast pair available: “git outta dh mood”/“git outta dh cah.” In this new fragment that contrast pair is used as a focus for recipient laughter; i.e., given the unit that has gone before (“git outta dh cah”), the occurrence of the subsequent unit (“git outta dh cah”) 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’th car jis froze yknow? . She sz. R:z’z whdua mattuh witchoo... she sid’ you better hurry on up. Fore I git outta de moo’d. She says.

Then:

(4) Mike: He says. I gotta git outta dh moood befo’ I c’n git outta dih cach: Alh hah
Gary: Uhuh-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.

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.

Dan: I thought that wz pretty outta sight didju hear me say’ y ou a junkie. (0.5)

Dolly: hehehehe hhheh-hehe

Joyce: Guz she wz off in the bushes with some buddy, tch! (0.7)

Sidney: ehh, hhhhhhh! (0.8)

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.
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 little...’ 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 a breath which is equivocal as to its character—i.e., may be a laugh onset or may be simply a postutterance exhalation (“[h][h][h]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 little things.

(6)

Ellen: 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.)

Inevitably Laughter

(5)
K: But going say:=th.
F: The end of Harbor Boulevard.
K: ahh ha:=ha:=ha:=

(6)
M: I, Edna you know I didn’t—
M: You know—
E: Heh you know I’m on
M: eeh yeh yeh yeh hhm hhm

B: Dju watch by any chance Miss International Showcase last night?
E: Nno I didn’t I wasn’t reading my-
B: You missed a really great

pro(d)
E: Ojhhh i jht walhthts
E: eeh 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 eventually 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 so 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 laugh 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 implicitive 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 append an object which is either clearly or equivocally a particle of laughter—i.e., it 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 'em pullin' em but he comin at
me dat needle's what I can't stand.

Vic: Use Tellim gas.

(9) Gene: So that shook the old (h)ouse(h)old up for a(h)h(h)ole heh
Patty: Oh yes I c'n imagine.

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 recipient's next speakers and 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.
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Now a speaker can have grounds to suspect that recipient is disinclined
to laugh (e.g., if the utterance contains some marks and/or specific in-
vitations to laugh and recipient has bypassed them), and can produce his
post-completion invitation attending the possibility of recipient’s declin-
ing. 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-à-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
decision/pursuit of topic. The invitation is a mere suggestion, follow-
ing a series of within-speech laugh particles recipient has bypassed.

That is, while speech can and does start up directly upon completion
point as in the fragments pertaining to declined invitations
to laugh ([813], 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. + HAHAH
Vic: Use ...
Gene: + fer aligh(whis)le heh
Patty: Oh yes ...
Vic: of a ho:ass. + heh
Mike: Yeh but ...
Natalie: + in Van Nuys, + ehh
Edna: lizze ...
Bee: + his ha:n(h)ds + hh hh
Ava: Why ...
Natalie: + den mother. + hh
Edna: + Are you ...

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.

James: . . . dat needles what I can’t stand.
Vic: Use. Tellim
James: hh Huh?
Vic: Tellim gass.

(8)
(16) Mike: Wud iz dat.
(0.0)
Vic: Uh:::
Th-gh-th guy widda bow'n arrow
ennah half on ass. 'th A half en ass
of a bow-ass.
Mike: Is that?
Vic: = buh h-heh hhigh widdahveh
Mike: Yeh but 'wuddh they call it
Vic: duh hell 'e iihh:::
Mike: what iz it the ram? =
Vic: = hhh!
Mike: = B'rscottarius's uh ram?
(0)
Vic: No. Ram is, ram is uh: a ram Yiknow
wih homs.

In each of these competitions held in multi-party settings, speaker and
recipient engage in competitive overlapping talk and the competition termi-
nates with no other parties joining the laughter and with speaker relin-
quishing 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 comple-
tion invitation to laugh is quickly countered, not by serious talk about
the rash, but by serious talk about the football bets, by the other partici-
 pant to that topic. The fact of two ongoing topics will be simply ascertained,
and the transcript will start at the point one member of the football con-
servation places a remark about the rash.

Bill: --- hh,hhhh
Sam: I'll give yih th' Giants-
Bill: = I bet it
Gloria: HEH HEH
Bill: =
Gloria: [huh huh HEH HEH HA:HA:hh
Lorraine: [huh huh HEH HEH 'hounthhh]
Bill: =
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 recipi-
ent(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 routine-
ly 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: = hh,hhh
Ken: heh heh heh
(19) Jeff: on Rambach's in there lyin there with a
smoke,
Jeff: = hh,hh ehhhh
Vana: 'aahh!!!
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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 heterofore competitive act. Here are two examples:

(22) Louise: How s How s How s
Roge: Tha wantu gl me in
the r-sing a thing hhh
Louise: How-How old were you w'ny first went.
Roge: By th'nime I'm nineteen m a genuine neurotic. heh!
Louise: How old were you when y'first went,
Roge: 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, hhhhh =
Natalie: =:er, what a waylyh =: waylyh take:=ke,
Edna: =: Oh::= wel = everybody's sad =
Natalie: my finals?
Natalie: hhh huh huh hhh!
Edna: finals Oh: Hwjuh do with yer

In our final instance, speaker not only produces an equivocal invitation, but after recipient's declaration 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.
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And note another version, here, of the competition-relinquishing token of special interest. That is, in fragment (11), the one who offered a minimal-equivalent 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 eventually 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-laugher, 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 preferred invitation and its subsequent treatment does not, in these materials, emerge as a conversationalist explicit issue in its own right, as it always potentially can and occasionally does. For example:
Jefferson

(26) Roger: Well it struck me funny.
(10) Al: HA, HA-HA-HA
Ken: Huh.
Roger: Thank you.

(27) Bill: That wz a joke people,
(-)
Bill: That wz-
Ellen: Yeh.
(-)
Bill: That- En yer spoze tuh smile.

REFERENCES

 niece 9: 56-59.
Sacks, Harvey, Schegloff, Emanuel A. and Jefferson, Gail (1974). A simple sys-
 tematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation. Language 50, 4,
 696-735.

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 ap-
preciation 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 situa-
tion, and place and year collected.

Fragment #

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

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(2) Two-party telephone, elderly woman and young man, former neighbors.
Orange County, California, 1979.
(3) Multi-party, family. In this fragment, mother and son. Newport Beach,
(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 Mar-
jorie 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 (1) above.
(8) Multi-party, a group of men gathered at a neighborhood upholstery shop.
(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 con-
secutive 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.
(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. Col-
lected by William Labov et al.