

Young children's use of laughter as a means of responding to questions

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Abstract

Techniques of conversation analysis are employed to reach a better understanding of the interactional competencies of young children. Drawing on audio–video recordings of mother–child interactions, this paper examines laughter by young children after questions by the child's mother. It is argued that by laughing the child is showing an orientation to the conditional relevance of a second pair part of an adjacency pair on the production of a first pair part. It is argued that possible bases for young children using laughter after a question are the child's inability to answer a question in full, and their unwillingness to do so. The children studied are in the second year of life and are making the transition from the single to multiword stage. All participants are native speakers of English and speak English throughout the recordings.

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1. Introduction

Laughter is an important interactional resource. Adults' use of laughter as an interactional resource, rather than a response to something humorous, is relatively well documented. Much less is known about how young children use laughter as an interactional resource. To know more about young children's use of laughter in interaction would be to know more about their developing interactional competencies. The child needs to figure out how to make use of this important interactional resource. Laughter is likely to be especially valuable to young children given the limitations on their linguistic resources. The child also needs to figure out how to use laughter, like adults, in a reflexively accountable way.

Previous research has shown that laughter is not a unitary phenomenon, and that laughter gets its meaning from its placement in its local interactional context including the immediately prior turn. This study discusses the occurrence of laughter by young children in a particular sequential slot: after questions by a parent. The methodology for the study is conversation analysis (CA). CA has provided important insights into the interactional competence of children (see [Kidwell \(2013\)](#) for an overview and references; see also [Forrester \(2015\)](#)). CA has also provided insights into laughter (see for example, the papers and references in [Glenn and Holt \(2013\)](#), [Wagner and Vöge \(2010\)](#)) and into the organisation of question–answer sequences (see [Hayano \(2013\)](#) for a review; for collections of papers on questions, see [de Ruiter \(2012\)](#), [Freed and Ehrlich \(2010\)](#), [Steensig and Drew \(2008\)](#), [Stivers et al. \(2010\)](#)). CA research dedicated to question–answer sequences in interactions involving young children is of particular relevance to this article. [Filipi \(2009:82–98\)](#)

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gives coverage to question–answer sequences involving adults and pre-verbal children, outlining some of the things which may be treated by adults as responses to questions, including vocalisations, pointing and laughter. Forrester (2010, 2013, 2015) tracks the development of a single child's ability to identify what he terms, following Sacks, the 'project of the question' (Sacks, 1992: volume I, p. 56), and provides analyses of sequences in which a child produces recognisable questions and answers. Working with recordings of children between 2;1 and 2;10, Keel (2011) shows how parents can follow an evaluative turn by a child with questioning repeats to ratify the child's evaluation, display surprise, project disagreement and delay the granting of a request embodied in the evaluation. Sidnell (2010) argues that "question-intoned" repeats by four-year-olds engaged in play may be used to deal with hearing problems, to deal with speaking problems (word selection, pronunciation) and to challenge the content of a prior turn. He also argues that laughter can be used during a questioning repeat, or in the response to it, to close down a question-repeat sequence. While there is some research on children's ability to produce and respond to questions taking a CA approach, none of this work gives sustained attention to children's use of laughter as a method for responding to questions at this stage of development.

There is some research using CA which provides insights into young children's use of laughter in other sequential contexts. Lerner and Zimmerman (2002) show a child at 1;10 laughing in an object-withdrawal tease sequence, just after presenting a toy figure to another child only to withdraw the figure as the child presenting the toy begins to close his fingers around it. In a study of toddler and parent interaction, rather than laughter per se, Filipi (2009) shows how laughter by a preverbal child at 1;0 can initiate a conversational sequence (pp. 95–96); a child at 1;4 is shown to use laughter as one resource among others to select a next speaker (pp. 181–182). Walker (2013) shows that young children can laugh purposefully after a transgression in order to provide for a reciprocal display of affiliation from the child's mother.

This article seeks to extend existing insights into young children's use of laughter. On the basis of analysis of instances of laughter by young children after a question from a parent, it is argued that young children can use laughter as a means of aligning with the question and showing an orientation to the conditional relevance of an answer to the parent's question, without responding to the question in full. Since laughter is conventionally associated with humour it is worth considering why laughter would be suited to this task. Given the age and developmental stage of the children – Forrester (2013, 2015) reports that the ability to comprehend and respond appropriately to questions is only just beginning to emerge around the age of the children studied here – it is unsurprising that on occasion the children are unable to answer the question in full. Laughter provides children with a valuable resource for handling such occasions. Laughter is readily available to children as reflected by its detection in the conduct of children as young as 10–11 weeks of age (Nwokah et al., 1994). Laughter does not have conventional syntactic structure, nor does it require the precise articulatory control needed to preserve lexical identity. These are things which the young child is yet to fully get to grips with. Since laughter does not overtly pursue any particular sequential line, it is equally suited as a response to any question. Laughter provides for a reciprocal display of affiliation from the child's co-participant (Walker, 2013), and it will be seen that in several examples presented here, the mother laughs in response to the young child's laughter.

Research in other interactional contexts shows that laughter has an affinity with conversational difficulties. Auburn and Pollock (2013) argue that children with autism who are low functioning (and may be nonverbal) can use laughter along with other resources to constitute an action as a potential laughable. Wilkinson (2007) shows that adults with aphasia can use laughter during extended sequences of self-initiated repair. Potter and Hepburn (2010) show that adults can use laughter coincident with a lexical item to mark out a problem or insufficiency in the speaker's use of the word. Glenn (2013) show that adults in employment interviews can laugh in response to an interviewer's question as a way of showing an orientation to the inadequacy of the response. Romaniuk (2013) shows that adult interviewees in broadcast news interviews can laugh as a first response to questions to undercut the legitimacy of the question and project a disaffiliative verbal response. These are not occasions where laughter is a response to something humorous.

The data and format of the transcriptions are discussed in Section 2. Transcriptions and descriptions of episodes of interaction are presented in Section 3. There is discussion of possible bases for the young child's laughter in response to questions from the child's mother Section 4. Section 5 presents some conclusions.

2. Data and transcriptions

The data are taken from audio–video recordings of mothers and their children in unscripted play in their own homes (Corrin, 2010). The recordings were made by Juliet Corrin and lodged by her with the University College London CAVA repository (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ls/cava>) as "JRC-DHCS: Single word–multiword transition." UCL manages password-protected access to the data in the repository by researchers. The signed agreement between the End User (the author) and UCL allows the data in the repository to be used for not-for-profit research and publication. There are six mother–child

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