

Don't make me laugh: Responsive laughter in (dis)affiliation[☆]

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Abstract

This paper examines laughter as a methodical resource for marking a just-prior turn as laughable, even when that turn has not been designed as such by its producer. It focuses in particular on one usage, where laughter targets a prior turn as preposterous and thus laughable: laughter is seen to be but one possible response in such contexts, and, as such, highly disaffiliative. By examining instances of video-taped family interaction and audio recordings of broadcast interviews, I examine the sequential environment both leading up to the production of the laughter – what makes the targeted turn so laughable – and subsequent to it, that is, how the laughter is elaborated verbally. I also examine the features of the laughter itself, and specifically what makes it recognizable as marking a highly negative stance with respect to what it targets. But who exactly produces the responsive laughter is here critical: when the laugh producer is not the ostensible recipient of the prior, laughable turn, the laughter produced is heard both to disaffiliate from that prior but in so doing, to affiliate with its recipient. Such uses show how a single action can be simultaneously both affiliative and disaffiliative.

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And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations: kings of people shall be of her.

Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?

Genesis, Chapter 17, 15–17

1. Introduction

The Book of Genesis reports that Abraham, having been told by God that his wife Sarah, aged ninety, will bear a child, 'fell upon his face, and laughed'. Laughing in response to something ostensibly 'serious' is thus a practice which has clearly had interactional salience across the ages; and, in what follows, I investigate, using conversational data, this practice of laughing in response to a turn not obviously designed to elicit laughter. I further explore the ways in which such laughter is implicated in affiliation and disaffiliation.

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Given the common associations of laughter with humour, the use of laughter as an affiliative resource is easily recognizable and has been well documented across a number of contexts (see, e.g. Jefferson et al., 1987; Jefferson, 1979; Glenn, 1991; Holt, 2011). ‘Affiliation’ here is characterized as action that endorses the stance or perspective expressed by a prior speaker. In a characterization that distinguishes ‘alignment’ from ‘affiliation’, Stivers et al. state:

...we conceptualize alignment as the structural level of cooperation and affiliation as the affective level of cooperation (Stivers, 2008). Thus, aligning responses cooperate by facilitating the proposed activity or sequence; accepting the presuppositions and terms of the proposed action or activity; and matching the formal design preference of the turn. By contrast, affiliative responses cooperate at the level of action and affective stance. Thus, affiliative responses are maximally pro-social when they match the prior speaker’s evaluative stance, display empathy and/or cooperate with the preference of the prior action (2011:21).

However, work in CA has also, from its earliest days (see, e.g. Sacks, 1992:12–20),¹ recognized that laughter has a rather more nuanced relationship with the actions it implements (see, e.g. Jefferson, 1974, and the collection in Glenn and Holt, 2013). The distinction between ‘laughing with’ and ‘laughing at’ (Glenn, 1995) is one that captures the ways in which laughter may equally be implicated in disaffiliation – expressing disapproval of, or distance from, another’s perspective – as affiliation.

Both Clayman (1992, 2001) and Romaniuk (2013) have shed light on this disaffiliative use of laughter by examining it in a specific institutional context: the broadcast political news interview, where political positions are assumed, maintained, and defended. In this context, laughter is used, either by the audience or by the interviewee, as a resource to uphold the laugh-producer’s own sharply distinct political perspective from the laugh-target. But, as Abraham’s documented response to God suggests, this practice is a generic one, across interactional contexts; and this paper investigates a number of audio- and video-taped exemplars across both British and American interactional data to explore further the ways in which this use of laughter is mobilized by participants in an episode of interaction. And, as we shall see, in multi-party interaction, while laughter may serve to disaffiliate from one recipient, it may in fact serve to affiliate with another.

The following excerpt² shows one such instance. It is taken from a dinner-time conversation recorded in the early 1970s in the USA. The mother of the family (‘Mom’, l.16) has left the table to fetch ice-cream; the fourteen-year old Virginia uses this absence as an opportunity to attempt to enlist her brother Wesley’s support in securing a raise in her weekly allowance (lls.16–20), a plea that is met, at l.22, with a burst of laughter from Wesley:

(1) I’d do it for you

Virginia, 17:15 (V = Virginia, W = Wesley, Virginia’s brother, P = Prudence (girlfriend/fiancee of Wesley)³)

1 W Where’s your daddy goin’ t’morrah.
 2 (2.4)
 3 P Oh. (0.6) He’s not goin’ yuh-) `e’s: gonna be (0.3)
 4 M? (from distance, but loudly) ([])=
 5 P [at a dinner t’morrah night.
 6 M =()]
 7 W (oh [I see.]) [(In Canyah?)]
 8 V [°Wesley.] [°Wesley.]
 9 V [(leaning over table to W, bouncing up and down in her
 10 seat, agitating her RH, bringing it up towards her
 11 mouth at second ‘Wesley’)
 12 P [Mm hm
 13 W [(brings eye gaze to V; hands clasped in front of face
 14 with elbows on table)
 15 (.)

¹ This references the second of Sacks’s topics in his collected lectures, from Fall 1964–Spring 1965: “On suicide threats getting laughed off” (1992:12–20) – an indication of how early on in CA laughter was treated as a topic of investigation.

² All video clips accompanying transcription extracts (that is, all exemplars except for (4)) are available at <http://privatwww.essex.ac.uk/~rclift/>.

³ Since brackets indicate actions (including non-verbal actions in the course of pauses) simultaneous with each other, so the single brackets at lls. 27 and 28 indicate simultaneous actions. The double brackets from lls. 29–31 inclusive thus mark that the actions indicated at lls. 30 and 31 take place in the (0.9) pause at l.29. The triple brackets at lls. 32 and 33 then indicate that Wesley’s action in lls. 33–35 take place in the (0.4) pause marked at l.32.

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