Laughter at Last: Playfulness and laughter in interaction☆

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Available online 24 May 2016

Abstract

Conversation analysis is used to examine a collection of sequences involving playful turns that are not immediately explicitly framed as laughable through laughter. Rather, laughter by the same speaker occurs after or in overlap with the recipient's response. Elements of the turns contribute to their playfulness, such as using exaggerated, formal and colloquial language. However, they are ambivalent in that they also do serious work. Many are first pair parts such as questions. Sacks (1992, p. 627) pointed out that non-serious first pair parts can be responded to with laughter, and thus not treated as having the sequential implications they might otherwise have. But in this collection responses align with serious sequential implications while sometimes simultaneously acknowledging and contributing to their playfulness. Laughter following or in overlap with the response then explicitly frames first turns (and, to an extent, the pair) as playful. However, its role in aligning with the just prior turn is often ambiguous, raising questions about the relationship of turns in this sequence. In general the analysis supports consideration of how playfulness is constructed and responded to in talk and of a technical understanding of the phenomenon.
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Keywords: Playfulness; Laughter; Non-seriousness; Interaction; Conversation analysis

1. Introduction

According to Bateson (1972) playful and serious actions are not completely distinct, thus when animals play-fight they signal that a bite is not a real attack but a mock one. They use metacommunication to indicate that 'this is play' (Bateson, 1972, p. 179). Once framed as play, actions do not have the same imports they would otherwise have. This applies to playful turns at talk. In interaction playful contributions may resemble non-playful ones but do not necessarily carry the same sequential relevancies. For example, a turn that takes the form of an invitation but has playful elements may not make an acceptance or a declination relevant but instead orientation to its playfulness (Glenn, 2003, p. 137). This phenomenon is complicated by the fact that many contributions to interaction are not entirely playful but are ambivalent. Metacommunicative signals, according to Bateson (1972), are paradoxical because they require both serious and non-serious interpretation at the same time. Further, complex forms of play may be 'constructed not upon the premise "This is play" but rather around the question "Is this play?"' (p. 182). Thus, playful exchanges are the product of negotiation and the distinction between playful and non-playful actions is not clear-cut.

This article focuses on a collection of sequences beginning with an ambivalently playful turn. Instances were drawn mainly from transcribed two-party telephone calls and analysed using conversation analysis. It arises out of a larger project exploring laughter in interaction (Holt, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). In the majority of instances in the larger collection[1]

laughter occurs in close proximity to its target or laughable (Glenn, 2003, p. 49), usually at the end of the same turn or in response. However, in these the laughter occurs following the recipient's response. The sequence is as follows:

    1 → A turn with playful elements but no immediate laughter by speaker A
    2 → A response from speaker B
    3 → Laughter from speaker A

A partially playful turn is produced without laughter and is responded to seriously or semi-seriously. Then laughter is produced by speaker A. Here is an instance from the collection to further illustrate the pattern.

(1)[Ramsay:27.3.96:B1:MR:3.37]
(From a call to a gas supply company. The customer has been sent a supply disconnection
notice before his invoice.)

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1      C:          ….you sent me the le:tter on the Friday .hh but
2                  you didn't send me the invoice to pay the gas bill
3                  until the ↑Saturday. .hh
4      E:          °ri:ght°
5      C:          .hh so you sent me the cut off notice first and the
6                  invoice afterwards
7      E:          right
8      C:1→        now is this normal with ((company name)) nowadays=
9      E:2→        =no wh- [wha-
10     C:3→                [.hh HEH HEH HEH HE=
11     E:          £n(h)o sh- [we'd (still      ) you first Mr Brown£
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The extract begins with the customer formulating (lines 1–3) and then reformulating (lines 5 and 6) the nature of the problem, both of which are responded to with 'right' (lines 4 and 7). In line 8 the customer asks whether it is "normal" for the company to send supply cut-off notices prior to sending out invoices. The turn is packaged as continuing this sequence whereby C summarizes his complaint, but it asks E to confirm that this mistake is normal practice. Thus, his suggestion evokes an unreal world where a company would routinely send cut-off notices prior to bills. But there is no laughter during or immediately after the turn. Rather, laughter occurs in overlap with the employee's response (line 10) where C produces four loud beats.

Analysis of this collection enables exploration of a number of issues. First, in considering the initial turn in the sequence it is possible to throw light on how playful turns are designed and what recurrent resources may be used by participants to create playful packaging. At the same time, however, the ambivalence of these turns is clear: as well as being playful, they also do serious work. Thus, it is possible to explore the overlapping nature of playfulness and non-playfulness. Second, examination of the responses facilitates consideration of how recipients respond to these ambiguously playful turns, especially in terms of whether they align with the serious work they perform. Third, the presence of laughter in the third turn supports analysis of its role in constituting turns and sequences as non-serious. Interestingly, initial turns do not have laughter as part of their design although laughter is recurrently central to constituting turns as non-serious. Analysis of these sequences shows that there are interactional benefits of not laughing at the beginning but using laughter to orient to playful aspects once the recipient has responded (or has had the opportunity to respond). Issues of alignment (Stivers et al., 2011) come to the fore as the laughter can reinforce a play frame when recipients have oriented to serious implications of the first turn. At a general level, the analysis throws light on how ambiguously playful sequences are designed and negotiated and how this can contribute towards a better understanding, in technical terms, of what playfulness is.

Closely related to playfulness is the phenomenon of non-seriousness. Sacks (1992, p. 672) offered the basis for a technical understanding of the distinction between seriousness and non-seriousness in sequential terms. He pointed out that second pair parts can treat first parts as non-serious by, for example, laughing:

> (I)t's one criterion of an utterance being a first pair member that it can be followed with, not *only* the second pair member but *either* the second pair member or laughter- or, alternatively, the question 'Are you kidding?' or 'Are you serious?' (p. 672, original italics)

Thus, there can be 'sequential ambiguity' (Sacks, 1992, p. 671) as to whether a first turn should be treated as having its usual sequential implications (for example, an invitation making relevant an acceptance or a declination) or treated as making relevant alignment with non-serious aspects such as by laughing (Glenn, 2003, p. 137). The design of the turn may, however, invite either serious or non-serious orientation. Thus, Jefferson (1979) showed how laughter during or at the completion of a first turn can invite reciprocation. Holt (2013) analysed the impact of the laughter in the following extract (line 9) in constituting the turn as non-serious (or, at least, not entirely serious).