Book Review

DOI 10.1515/humor-2014-0076


In this volume, the editors marshal a number of scholars concerned with the phenomenon of laughter particularly from the perspective of conversational analysis. All supply ample transcriptions of conversational data, the reading of which is facilitated via a companion website, a practice recommendable to other CA researchers. Another asset is the multimodal approach they deploy, using video recordings to enable analyses of features like facial expressions and body language to which audio recordings alone provide no access.

The book is divided into four parts, “Varieties of Laughter”, “Laughs in Turns”, “Laughs in Sequences”, and “Laughter and Identity”. Owing to its subject’s nature, however, overlaps are frequent. The editors’ clear aim from the outset is to focus on laughter per se rather than its association with humor, the two phenomena being, of course, independent. In fact, most of the contributors underscore the presence of laughter outside a humorous context, highlighting the major role it plays in a wide variety of social behaviors. Thus laughter serves as a social lubricant that enhances affiliation and may also serve to align one with an interlocutor while also alleviating interactional tension; vice versa, it can also signal disalignment from others. In addition, alongside pleasure and joy, laughter can also indicate nervousness, awkwardness and embarrassment. Accordingly, the contributors’ prime concern is to define the function of laughter when it is not signaling that something is funny and, as conversational analysts, they are striving towards a much-needed systematic categorization of the phenomenon itself.

Following an extensive introduction, the volume begins by considering varieties of laughter, telling us that laughing can vary significantly both from person to person and from occurrence to occurrence. Accordingly there are numerous English words that describe different forms of laughter, for example “chortle”, “giggle”, “guffaw”, “snigger”, as well as diverse idioms such as “to crack up” and “to split one’s sides”. Other languages too have their own repertoires although, as translators well know, perfect overlaps between languages may not be possible. Such lexical differentiations raise the question of how laughter might actually vary between cultures. However, despite the array of laughter words, lexical

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systems do not describe the sounds of laughter precisely. In English laughter is conventionally transcribed by “ha ha” or “tee hee”, though nobody actually laughs like that, unless ironically. Furthermore, such transliterating conventions vary between languages, witness the Italian *hihihi*; Spanish *jajaja*; French *héhé*, etc., a clear problem for conversational analysts seeking to record verbal interaction accurately and methodically.

As the contributions reveal, laughter is extremely pervasive in conversation and therefore definitely requires proper classification. Hepburn and Varney open the first section, “Varieties of Laughter”, by suggesting how scholars may scrupulously transcribe it using guidelines for the clear and accurate rendering of the various distinct features of laughter, from the smallest units of “laughter particles” (p. 26) to laughter embedded in and related to conversation. Clearly a gargantuan task, the transcription of laughter must manage features including vowel placement, pitch, aspiration, consonants, laughter particles within talk and post-completion particles – a challenge that Hepburn and Varney face with conviction, their contribution delivering a much needed analytical tool.

Variety in laughter is also examined by Ikeda and Bysouth who, working with a robust sample of video-recorded Japanese interactions, explore how laughter functions within multiparty exchanges. They particularly examine how laughter negotiates the fluctuating participation status in ongoing talk-in-interaction, showing that laughter serves not only as an index of fun and appreciation, but more specifically as a way to organize speaker participation. Analyzing two types of laughter, they examine the occurrence of laughter at turn transition spaces, demonstrating how it differs in the case of “recipient” laughter, as chosen by a passive participant, and “turn initial” laughter, as adopted by someone cooperating actively. In highlighting the complexity of turn-taking management in such interactions, Ikeda and Bysouth adopt a multimodal approach embracing not only participants’ verbal and non-verbal vocal interactions, but also their facial expressions, eye contact and body-language, which, coupled with laughter, provide scope for detailed analyses.

Holt opens the section “Laughs in Turns” by setting out to distinguish seriousness from non-seriousness. Again, through the existence of comments such as “You must be joking!”, “Are you kidding?”, “I’m perfectly serious”, language supplies us with evidence of how nicely they may be separated, yet still demonstrates how inextricably intertwined seriousness and non-seriousness are, highlighting especially how non-seriousness accompanied by laughter helps one to negotiate the “micropolitics of daily life” (p. 89). Instances of laughter occur repeatedly in delicate interactions that require diplomacy and discretion in order to avoid misunderstanding, disaffiliative actions or the giving of offence. Indeed several studies in the book examine laughter set within delicate interactions undertaken
at awkward junctures. Hence Shaw, Hepburn and Potter study how laughter can occupy a terminal position within the transmission space, as after disquieting actions such as a complaint. Here too laughter may alleviate a troublesome action, thus cushioning incipient disaffiliation.

A need to mitigate delicate situations stretches well beyond the private sphere, since awkward junctures may occur in many institutional settings such as medical examinations, the classroom, televised news discussions and job interviews, where laughter may come to a speakers’ aid. In all these domains power relations are asymmetrical, as the doctor, the teacher and the interviewer are in control. So, all things not being equal, how is delicacy negotiated via laughter?

Tica, Fatigante and Orletti choose to examine the role of laughter in medical consultations, a decidedly tricky and delicate domain, where, understandably, laughter may occur for a variety of reasons ranging from the laughing off of a patient’s troubles to the improving of doctor/patient relations. Tica observes the role of laughter in a robust sample of video-recorded bilingual medical consultations in a rural clinic in Yucatan, where patients would typically respond to a doctor’s questions or criticisms with laughter. Doctors in the recorded consultations were mainly Spanish monolinguals whereas the patients were either Yucatec Mayan monolinguals or Spanish-Yucatec-Mayan bilinguals. Tica’s recordings show that the doctors’ questions concerning lifestyle provoked patients’ laughter, particularly in response to criticism over sensitive issues such as breastfeeding and hygiene, signs, no doubt, of their resistance to accept changes that the physician was suggesting. Here too, the multimodal analysis which accommodates a wide range of paralinguistic features helps to explain the interactions. Especially interesting is the presence in the consultations of a non-professional interpreter who mediated not only linguistic interchange but also and especially the patients’ cultural expectations.

Fatigante and Orletti analyze a series of medical encounters in Rome between a female Italian gynecologist, a nurse and a number of immigrant patients from different countries. The data incorporate a number of variables similar to those in Tica’s corpus, ranging from the asymmetrical power structure of the participants to the lingua-cultural gap between the different participants. They demonstrate how laughter plays a crucial role in the negotiation of alignment and affiliation between the three parties involved, and how it helps construct comity and thus the inclusion of a patient who might feel marginalized if only when the more “powerful” doctor and nurse laugh together. However, here too, delicacy is centrally important owing to the very nature of medical examinations, which are likely to elicit emotional reactions of nervousness and embarrassment.

Another example of a problematic institutional situation is when a student challenges his/her teacher’s knowledge. In a contribution entitled “Cause the
textbook says . . .”. Jacknick looks at the part played by laughter in challenges set during an ESL class. By disputing something the teacher has said, students are both threatening and testing that teacher’s authority. In response, the teacher may laugh in order to negotiate a tricky moment and to cultivate affiliation with her students. Once more, it would appear that laughter occurs when delicacy is at issue, as Jacknick examines the intricate network of student laughter and teacher laughter, and how both enhance affiliation and disaffiliation in situations where group asymmetries are paramount. Laughter in reality effects tactical adjustments as interaction develops.

In his study of laughter in televised news interviews with politicians, Romaniuk reports a series of potentially face-threatening sequences where the public officials involved in the program employ laughter in response to serious questions. According to Romaniuk this is “risky business” (p. 218), if only because its disaffiliative use may appear inauthentic to the public and hence attract negative publicity. Recorded materials endure, the author reminding us that Hilary Clinton’s laugh, labeled “The Clinton Cackle”, proved politically disadvantageous to her. His data are also relevant to the issue of asymmetry, for the interviewer, playing on home ground, may control the interaction, but since he is dealing with personalities, the balance of interactional power is less clear-cut than might at first appear. Glenn closes the volume with an examination of another delicate institutional occasion, namely the job interview, focusing in particular on how interviewees laughed nervously during a series of video-recorded sessions. Amongst other things it emerges that laughter occurs at delicate moments, as when the interviewee feels under pressure or when she wants to modify a previous stance, Glenn suggests that what we conventionally consider as nervous laughter may be a reaction that enables more precise conversational maneuvers.

Part 3, “Laughs in Sequence”, opens with Auburn and Pollock’s multimodal study of Alfie, an autistic child with limited speech and movement, refuting the notion that laughter in autistic children is confined to an inner state, since Alfie actively uses smiles and laughter to initiate affiliation. This study examines delicate situations as when Alfie requests more biscuits or refuses to participate in a teaching sequence. Although he may be linguistically restricted, he can deploy laughter for strategic purposes: Auburn and Pollock determine how, combined with gesture, the non-speech sound of laughter orients affiliation, as when Alfie uses laughter to tease his interlocutor.

In Part 4 contributors turn to the issue of laughter and identity. In daily life we are able to recognize many people from their signature laughs, while gender may certainly be fashioned by laughter. Laughter is probably infectious, since people are certainly more likely to laugh in company than when alone, and laughing together undeniably enhances fellowship and belonging. So could it be that
the Yucatec-Mayan couple who laughed at the doctor’s suggestions regarding their offspring’s upbringing were enhancing their identity in opposition to him? Meanwhile Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain focus on laughter and the construction of identity in examining a sample of video-recorded interviews, firstly of some West Germans who, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, migrated to the eastern region of Saxony, and secondly of some German immigrants and their descendants in Canada. In the interviews participants were questioned over what it means to be German in Canada, or how they reacted to symbols of the former German Democratic Republic. What emerges is that laughter is fundamental to the construction of identity: as acknowledging the fuzziness of migrant individuality, but above all as denoting affiliation and stance. Clift focuses on how identities can be generated during interaction, her corpus of telephone conversations displaying speakers who laughed while complaining about someone in order not to be perceived as having a bad personality trait.

Overall, this book is definitely not about humor, but concerns laughter and its interactional function. As such it is invaluable for those interested in conversational analysis and personal interaction. However humor scholars will also find it of great interest. Instances of affiliative laughter are examined throughout, alongside laughter used to stimulate positive emotion, and laughter intended to delicately promote positive and constructive communication. Nevertheless, other examples show how laughter reveals resistance to an adverse comment, as in the reaction of the Yucatec Mayan couple to the doctor’s advice, and are firmly linked to incongruity situated outside the interaction. In laughter, as in humor, positivity, incongruity and emotion remain interlinked, laughter and humor remaining siblings that share a close, though complicated, relationship.