The role of laughter in establishing solidarity and status

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Abstract

Drawing on a range of American, Australian, British and Scandinavian research into laughter, the current paper will use the form of pragmatic analysis typically found in qualitative research and apply it to data produced by the quantitative methodology common in the author's own discipline of psychology. Laughter will be examined as an indexical that serves both a discourse deictic function, designating the utterance in which it occurs as non-serious, and a social deictic function, marking the laughing person's preference for social proximity with fellow interlocutors. The paper will then analyse examples and data pertaining to three types of laughter bout derived from taking laughter as an indexical. First, solitary listener laughter will be argued to signify a deferential acknowledgement of continued solidarity with the speaker. Second, solitary speaker laughter will be suggested to mark a simple preference for solidarity. Third, joint laughter will be accepted as a signifier of actual solidarity that may also be used to mark status depending on which party typically initiates the joint laughter. Joint laughter thus acts in a manner closely analogous to the exchange of another set of indexicals, the T and V versions of second person pronouns in European languages. Finally, the paper will conclude by examining the problematic case of laughing at another interlocutor, before briefly considering the implications of this pragmatic perspective for traditional accounts of laughter as well as for future research.

Keywords: laughter, indexicals, solidarity, status.

1. Introduction

Traditional accounts of laughter owe much to Darwin (1979 [1872]: 198) and are grounded in the notion that laughter is the outward manifestation of the inner experience of joy, typically elicited by humorous talk or events (e.g., Gervais & Wilson 2005: 398-401). Such accounts are not readily adapted to explain the occurrence of laughter in the absence of humour or, more widely, in situations which might elicit negative affect. For example, Edmonson (1987: 28)

includes among the diverse meanings of laughter, "sincerity, nervousness, vapidity, hysteria, embarrassment, amusement, mockery, friendliness, raillery, sycophancy, taste, strength of character, even sanity". Edmonson's (1987: 29) view is that laughter is unlikely to be understood in terms of phonetics, his initial aim, but requires close examination of the social interaction in which it occurs. The current paper adopts a similar position in assuming that laughter cannot be fully understood if isolated from the social and linguistic context in which it occurs.

If one was to employ a gross classification of the methods employed to study laughter as a discrete vocal gesture then one might identify two largely distinct methodologies: pragmatically oriented, qualitative approaches, such as Conversational Analysis (CA), and reductionist quantitative approaches, such as social psychology. Prime exemplars of CA include Schenkein (1972), Jefferson (1979; 1984) and Glenn (2003) who demonstrated that laughter is produced, elicited and suppressed at particular points during interaction. Other pragmatically oriented qualitative approaches, such as sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, examine laughter with respect to its wider linguistic and social context. Typical exponents include Haakana (2002), who focussed on doctor and patient laughter during medical interactions, and Haugh's (2010) study of jocular mockery. The second reductionist, quantitative methodology is found both in biology and psychology and is aimed at establishing relationships between frequencies of laughs and various contextual variables such as gender (Provine 1993; 2000) and degree of acquaintance (Smoski & Bachorowski 2003a; 2003b). Although this approach is often criticised for its reliance on experimental studies, the data produced do reveal normative regularities in the manner in which laughter occurs that typically transcend the experimental context. The current review is an attempt to meld the insights of the qualitative, pragmatically oriented approaches in a way that could explain some of the regularities of laughter use that have been identified using quantitative methodologies.

To achieve this aim, it is necessary to study laughter in the same way we study any other part of language, that is within its wider linguistic (e.g., Widdowson 2004: 36-73) and social context (e.g., van Langenhove & Harré 1999: 14-31). A potentially valuable means of explicating the relationship between laughter and its context is to treat laughter as an indexical, as was suggested by Glenn (2003: 48) and Deacon (2012), and has been developed extensively by Ginzburg et al. (2020). Indexicals, such as personal and demonstrative pronouns, can be defined as signs in any modality, that point to other features of the environment in which they are embedded (see Silverstein 1976). The review that follows represents an attempt to establish the theoretical value of conceiving laughter as an indexical.

In developing this account, two somewhat neglected distinctions as to how laughter typically occurs during everyday talk will be made. The first is between laughter offered by the listener and laughter offered by the speaker, and the second is between solitary laughter by the speaker or hearer, and joint laughter, when both parties laugh together. Using these distinctions, the varying achievements of solitary listener laughter, solitary speaker laughter, and joint laughter will be discussed in some depth. Discussions of each bout will be accompanied by brief examinations of three issues particularly pertinent to each bout. First, the content of the talk or utterances that precedes laughter, often termed a *laughable* (see Glenn 2003: 48-49), will be considered in relation to solitary listener laughter, while second, the extent of the listener's obligation to join in the laughter, will be discussed with reference to the 'force' of the speaker's laughable in solitary speaker laughter. Third, in relation to joint laughter, the importance of differential rates of who initiates the joint laughter and its relationship with status will be considered with reference to the manner in which the intimate T form and the polite V form of the second person pronoun are exchanged. Following consideration of these three bouts and attendant issues, an application of these ideas to an example of laughing at will be provided. Finally, some tentative conclusions on the implications of treating laughter as an indexical will

be drawn, first, for the explanatory role of emotion in accounting for laughter and, second, for future research.

In passing it should be noted that the current review is largely confined to talk and only occasional reference will be made to laughter with regard to nonverbal activity. Secondly, the review will focus on everyday talk, defined loosely to include any occasion during which the talk is oriented towards getting something done, which might include chatting or gossiping. Limited reference will be made to the laughter elicited during joke telling or found in staged performances such as comedy shows or theatre. Thirdly, the majority of the research and examples are based on the ideal case of two interlocutors, with more limited consideration being given to interactions in which the speaker has an audience of more than one hearer. Concentration on this ideal of dyadic interaction is used to justify the preference for the term, solitary listener laughter. Finally, at the risk of a little confusion, the form of transcription of the examples of laughter found in the original publications has been retained. Thus, laughter might simply have been recorded as 'laughter' or efforts might have been made to describe its detailed acoustic properties and precisely where it began and ended with respect to the talk of the other party.

2. Laughter as an indexical

2.1. Laughter: Definition and Description

Van Hooff (1972: 235), drawing on extensive research into primates, argued that laughter served a metacommunicative function by "designating the behaviour with which it is associated as mock-aggression or play". Smiling, which Van Hoof considered had a distinctive phylogenetic basis among humans, was argued to be closely allied to laughter but is more likely to be used to signify a pro-social attitude to another rather than active play and, unlike laughter, can regularly occur when a person is not interacting.

The production of such natural or 'spontaneous' laughter, in keeping with its evolutionary origin, has been found to involve different regions of the brain from those involved in 'volitional' laughter and speaking (Bryant et al. 2018: 1517). This explains why such conversational laughter can be reliably distinguished by listeners from volitional laughter produced when a person is simply instructed to laugh (Bryant & Aktipis 2014; also Brown et al. 2018).

The manner in which this natural laughter comes to punctuate everyday speech (Provine 2017: 239) remains to be fully determined but the process of incorporation occurs early in a child's development. Laughter makes its first appearance among infants as early as 4 months, typically as a vocal response to tactile or auditory stimulation by trusted others (e.g., Sroufe & Wunsch 1972). Over the course of their first year infants begin to laugh earlier in the playful interaction (Sroufe & Wunsch 1972: 1337) and, by the end of their first year, will initiate joint laughter with a caregiver (Nwokah et al. 1994: 32) and laugh during play, even when the other shows no signs of positive affect (Mireault et al. 2015). According to Reddy (cited in Mireault et al. 2015: 31), infants as young as 9 months will attempt to make others laugh using a variety of nonverbal acts. In short, over the course of six months of the infant's life, from 4 to 9 months, laughter, having started as an innate response signalling non-seriousness, becomes embedded in playful interaction sequences that will form the basis of later verbal exchanges as the child's language develops (see Bruner 1975).

2.2. Laughter as a designation of non-seriousness

In his seminal discussion of *hehehs*, Schenkein (1972: 365-366) demonstrates how laughter is "tied in a most powerful way to the immediately prior utterance" and that frequently it is heard as proposing that the prior utterance is non-serious. Although he eschews the term *indexical*, Schenkein's analysis clearly suggests that laughter acts as such. Developing Schenkein's argument by drawing on the work of Silverstein (1976) and Levinson (1983), it is suggested that laughter, as an indexical, is typically used in two closely related ways during talk: as discourse deixis, to characterise the utterance to which the laughter is directed as non-serious and, simultaneously, as social deixis, to act as a mode of address that signifies a preference for solidarity.

The first property of laughter as an indexical is explored extensively by Ginzburg et al. (2020). They stress that laughter is nearly always directed at contiguous talk or action that Glenn (2003) and others in the CA school term *laughables*. Ginzburg et al. offer a variety of achievements of the laughter from signifying that the laugher finds the laughable incongruous or pleasant, to expressing the laugher's rejection of the laughable or simple disbelief. In the current review, however, it is posited that laughter serves, more simply, to characterise the laughable as non-serious. This characterisation relies on laughter fulfilling a consistent pragmatic, as opposed to semantic function, one which signifies that the utterance to which the laughter refers flouts the Gricean maxim of quality: the speaker is not fully committed to the illocutionary act that the utterance would appear to be intended to achieve (see Levinson 1983: 100-118). This characterisation allows us to explain the vast range of implications of laughter in terms of the content and force of the utterance to which the laughter refers, be it an assertion, promise, threat, apology and so on. Importantly, the characterisation of the utterance as 'non-serious' usually preserves the basic illocutionary force of the utterance but reduces or attenuates its force (Holmes 1984). For instance, criticising or insulting a hearer indexed with laughter constitutes a tease. Lampert & Ervin-Tripp (2006: 63) offer the following example of a 'mild' tease by Barb on Carl regarding his shoes and small feet. Carl's laughter acknowledges the evaluation of his shoes but designates the description as non-serious.

Example 1
Barb: They're sort of – they're sort of this marvellous combination of whatever I'd imagine an Oxford philosopher would wear and a hobbit
Carl: (laughs)

The rationale for using the term *non-serious* to describe the referential function of laughter as an indexical, rather than *playful*, for example, deserves further mention. Principally, the non-serious designation was thought to better reflect the first instances of infant laughter that typically occur no later than six months of age (e.g., Nwokah et al. 1994). These instances reveal that the infant laughter is typically a response to behaviour of a trusted other that appears aggressive or harmful or otherwise detrimental to the infant but is not. As Blurton-Jones (1972: 281) notes, the close association between laughter and 'fearful' situations is continued in older children when it is regularly observed during such activity as rough and tumble play. Secondly, it will be shown that laughter is often associated with 'negative' utterances such as derogatory remarks concerning the self or another, admissions of mistakes, complaints and apologies. The designation of 'playful' works well for more positive laughables such as witticisms or absurdities, but does not accurately reflect the range of behaviour and utterances to which laughter can refer.

2.3. Laughter as a mode of address

The second property of laughter as an indexical is intimately linked to the designation of talk as non-serious and concerns laughter as a mode of addressing the other (see Silverstein 1976: 36): the laugher expresses a preference to maintain or possibly reduce the social distance between him or herself and the interlocutors. A second example from Lampert & Ervin-Tripp (2006: 55) can be understood as laughter acting almost exclusively on the basis of this second property concerned with maintaining solidarity. It is an unusually extreme example of a close friend insulting the other during a dinner party involving two close friends of a brother and sister:

Example 2
Greg: If you cook like this every night, Amanda, I'll come down and eat with you.
Victor: That's why she doesn't
Greg: What! (laughs)
Victor: That's why she doesn't
Greg: (laughs)

In example 2, Victor's explanation of why Amanda does not often cook in this way implicates that Amanda does not like Greg – a significant insult. Greg's laughter at this exceptional and unexpected slight demonstrates that he does not attach any credence to the utterance. Greg's recognition of the total non-seriousness of the utterance within the context of his close relationship with Victor is an interpretation not immediately shared by the two women at the dinner party who remark on the insult. This prompts Victor to explain to them that "He (Greg) knows he was just kidding." Only those who are confident in their relationship would risk such "outlandish" insults. Anthropological research has identified that in many cultures joking is a marker of quite specific relationships (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Sykes 1966) and that jocular insults wholly devoid of any truth content are a common feature of these relationships, particularly if they involve males (e.g., Roy 1959; Porcu 2005).

By describing this indexical property as a preference, it is left to the other to determine whether the social relationship between interlocutors will be affected depending on whether the other joins in the laughter or not. Wider contextual factors will also play a role in addition to the illocutionary force of the utterance to which the laughter refers, including the position of the laugher as speaker or listener, the existing relationship between interlocutors, and perhaps the occasion of the talk. Modulation of the relationship is deemed to occur along two broad dimensions: solidarity, or social distance, and also status, or deference. These dimensions require additional explication.

The two dimensions of solidarity and status, though described in a variety of ways and not without detractors claiming they are too simplistic (e.g., Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990: 134-148), are generally deemed to underlie any social relationship, not just between humans (see Brown 1965: 51-91) but also between primates (van Hooff 1972; Palagi 2008) and other mammals (e.g., East et al. 1993: 'hyenas'). Brown & Levinson (1987: 74-84) argue that power and social distance represent two of the three, probably universal, factors that affect politeness and face, the third being the degree of imposition on the person when making a request of them. In a similar fashion, a basic premise of the use of laughter during talk is assumed to be that, underlying the complexities of any interaction, interlocutors are concerned with the prospect of maintaining solidarity, that is, a "working" relationship with the other, and also that interlocutors are interested in their relative status or power, that is, who will determine the direction of the interaction. It is presumed that during all talk there will be transient shifts in the degree of solidarity and relative status and that laughter, as a universal sign, has been incorporated into

language to be used as one of a number of signs that can modulate these two fundamental forms of relationship.

This brief introduction has argued that laughter as an indexical has at least two interrelated functions (see Levinson 1983: 85-94): a discourse deictic function of designating utterances as non-serious and a social deictic function of expressing to others a preference for continued solidarity. While Adelsward (1989: 129) did not explicitly take laughter as an indexical, these two properties closely correspond to her concluding interpretation of laughter which was that it allowed the laugher to display "an attitude towards your interlocutor as well as what you are talking about". It is perhaps telling that Adelsward's interpretation followed one of the few attempts to systematically examine how laughter was used, depending on the position of the laugher as speaker or hearer, the role of the laugher, for example as interviewer or interviewee, and the occasion of talk. Adelsward's focus on these basic contextual features of the talk in relation to laughter provides the template for the major part of the current review: solitary listener laughter, solitary speaker laughter, and joint laughter. In reviewing these different forms of laughter bout, both indexical properties of laughter will be considered, however, the main focus will be on laughter as a mode of address and the implications that this laughter has on the relationship between interlocutors depending on the position of the laugher as speaker and listener, and, most importantly, whether the other joins in the laughter or not.

3. Solitary listener laughter

Developmentally, solitary laughter in response to another's actions is the earliest form of laughter that one can reliably observe in humans. Nwokah et al. (1994) established that laughter was only found when mother and infant were interacting and that the majority of both mother and infant laughs were solitary. They also noted that laughter was always associated with some aspect of the ongoing interaction and suggested that among pre-linguistic infants solitary laughter could be said to mean "This is fun". The indexical property of this 'translation' is clear but the attribution of an affective state of amusement does not appear necessary. If the infant is simply confirming that whatever is happening at the time 'is not serious', we can readily account for the great range of actions that can prompt laughter in children.

Taking tickling as a prime example, it is not only the intrinsically "ticklish" sensations of a light touch, Hall & Allin's (1897) *knismesis*, that may induce laughter, but also the more vigorous poking and prodding of *gargalesis* that are even more effective as a tickle (see also Kozintsev 2012: 75-92). It seems plausible that infant laughter begins as a characterisation of the apparent 'attack' of the tickler as non-serious but later is extended to encompass any unexpected event or behaviour of another. This would explain the wide variety of 'surprising' stimuli that infants laugh at (Sroufe & Wunsch 1972). Games such as 'Round and round the garden' and 'This little piggy', sudden noises as when crying "Aaaah boo", and pretending to feed the infant through the ear, are just some of the vast range of verbal and non-verbal acts at which the infant laughs to confirm their lack of seriousness. Also important is that the perpetrators are trusted by the infant. As Darwin (1979 [1872]: 201) noted, an infant seldom laughs when tickled by a stranger. Only those with whom the infant is very familiar can be reliably expected to perform surprising but harmless acts.

3.1. Examples of solitary listener laughter

Among infants it is typically nonverbal acts which elicit laughter, but as the child develops, unusual and unexpected noises and later articulated utterances may also begin to elicit laughter (e.g., Bainum et al. 1984). In adults, although events and acts can still prompt laughter, the

concern here is with talk. Two typical examples of solitary listener laughter are offered. In both cases the speaker does not laugh during the utterance. The first from Holmes (2000: 176) is an exchange between a boss, Neil, and his research assistant, Ken:

Example 3
Neil: …...hate to drag you away when you're obviously having so much fun but it is after ten.
Ken   (laughs) some fun

Ken acknowledges the non-seriousness of Neil's assessment by laughing as well as explicitly addressing Ken's ironic utterance – 'some fun'. The acknowledgement of the 'laughable' utterance by Ken serves to confirm his preference for solidarity. A second example is from an experimental study (McLachlan 2021) and involves two participants discussing a hypothetical life dilemma about a couple contemplating marriage:

Example 4
(A) And the other thing is that they've consulted a m marriage counsellor before they're married
(B) He   he   he

Again, the first speaker draws attention to the peculiar circumstances in which an unmarried couple might seek guidance from a marriage counsellor before they are actually married. The listener's laughter again is an acknowledgement of the non-serious nature of the remark and confirmation of his preference for solidarity. In both examples, therefore, the speaker has introduced a potentially laughable utterance unmarked by laughter that the listener has accepted as non-serious. By laughing the listener is also accepting whatever position the speaker has adopted while the confirmation of non-seriousness implies an attenuation of the illocutionary force of the utterance (see Holmes 2000: 178).

Having sketched out the development of solitary listener laughter and offered a couple of examples, the rather limited number of systematic studies that have examined solitary listener laughter as a distinct form of laughter bout can be considered. Provine (1993; 2000: 27-29) provided data on the incidence of listener laughter but did not distinguish between solitary and joint laughter. The data therefore provide only a rough indication of the frequency of solitary listener laughter. Provine examined four possible male and female dyadic combinations and found that females provided the highest frequency of listener laughter when talking to males and males produced the lowest frequency when talking to females. Within same gender interaction, males produced more listener laughter than females. McLachlan (2021) distinguished solitary listener from joint listener laughter and found only one statistically reliable trend for low status female students to offer significantly higher rates of solitary listener laughter than their high-status female staff interlocutors. McLachlan replicated the tendency identified by Provine for males to offer relatively more solitary listener laughter relative to the frequency of their other bouts of laughter when talking to other males but the results were not statistically reliable. McLachlan also found that females, when talking to other females of equal status, provided relatively little solitary listener laughter. Finally, Adelsward (1989) found significantly more listener laughter, much of it solitary, among interviewers of convicted fraudsters than was provided by the fraudsters as interviewees.

3.2. Implications of solitary listener laughter

Though sparse, the data only hint at the implications for the relationship between the speaker and listener. The latter is temporarily occupying a subordinate position in the conversational structure (Sacks et al. 1974; Heritage 2012) and in acknowledging the laughable utterance with

laughter, the listener is deferring to the speaker's stance. At the same time the listener's laughter is a response to the speaker's unmarked laughable, an implicit declaration of non-seriousness, and therefore reduces its expressive force. The listener is still expressing a preference for solidarity but it lacks the potency of laughter provided by the speaker. Nevertheless, the speaker can accept this expressed preference and laugh along if preferred – behaviour that will be considered in Section 4.

In so far as both parties are equally likely to occupy the position of listener, though not necessarily for the same length of time, the frequency of deferential and marginally less close solitary listener laughter among interlocutors is likely to be comparable unless the listener also occupies a generally low status role with respect to the speaker. In cases where the interlocutors differ with respect to status, Stevanovic's (2018) notion of deontic rights and obligations within conversations are relevant. The particular rights enjoyed by high status speakers may account for their relative success in 'making the hearer laugh' as low status listeners feel obliged to acknowledge the laughables of their high-status speakers with laughter. In the findings cited above, this was the case when female staff talked to female students (McLachlan 2021) and was probably the case when the fraudsters were engaged in a research interview (Adelsward 1989), although this assumes that during research it is the interviewer who occupies the subordinate role as she seeks information from a knowledgeable source. It is also plausible that when young females are romantically interested in males they will position themselves deferentially. Provine (1993: 296) suggested males were more adept at "evoking audience laughter" and in same gender interaction this may be the case but, as has been noted by Grammer (1990), gender differences only emerge when the preferences of all parties coincide. When females do not seek intimacy, they will not defer to males by laughing at their laughables. Such laughter would be construed as a preference for solidarity, albeit a weak one, which also offers an opportunity for male speakers to join in.

3.3. Unmarked laughables

In examining solitary listener laughter, some mention needs to be made of the nature of the laughable utterances to which this listener laughter refers. The most obvious laughable is an utterance that the speaker concludes with laughter (see Jefferson 1979; Glenn 2003: 48-49) but in the case of solitary listener laughter this sign is absent, hence the term *unmarked*. Attempts to define a laughable, particularly those unmarked by speaker laughter, have proved problematic as "virtually any utterance or action could draw laughter" (Glenn 2003: 49). Fully acknowledging this issue, Glenn (2003: 49) had recourse to an extremely loose position that if one was to avoid the circular position of defining a laughable on the basis of the hearer's laughter one could only rely on a reasonable argument that the utterance was "designed to draw laughter". The position adopted in the current review replaces the speaker's intention of drawing laughter with the more general aim of the speaker trying not to be taken seriously. An extremely brief introduction to laughables will now be offered, focusing on their content and apparent illocutionary force (e.g., Searle 1969: 22-53). The closely related property of laughables with respect to how strongly they 'encourage' the listener to laugh will be considered after discussing solitary speaker laughter (see Section 3.)

Provine (1993) was one of the first to recognise that everyday utterances to which laughter refers are rarely 'funny' or 'amusing' in the conventional sense. In his later work, Provine (2000: 40-42) provides 25 matter of fact statements and questions and 25 humorous statements and questions that prompted laughter. Some of the latter do not seem especially humorous judged purely in terms of their content, for example, "that's because you're a male", "you just farted", "what did you do to your hair", and "are you going to wear that". A similar range of apparently

serious to apparently humorous remarks formed the basis of Long & Graesser's (1998) classification of wit, which they distinguished from ritualised humour. Using interactions between hosts and guests on televised talk shows, Long & Graesser identified eleven, sometimes overlapping, classes of wit, including four evaluative categories, irony, satire, sarcasm, and exaggeration; two classes concerned with social selves, self-deprecation and teasing; and the remaining five classes offered as entertainment, including deliberately misunderstanding questions or statements, puns, double entendres, and misquoting sayings and adages. Only the last group of five could be seen to specific examples of self- contained utterances designed to 'draw laughter'.

In an effort to demonstrate the range of content and illocutionary force of laughables, a small number of examples from Partington's (2006) extensive analysis of White House press briefings will be used. The first from Partington (2006: 139) includes an obfuscation by Mr Lockart, a White House press secretary, as a potential laughable followed by a deliberate misunderstanding by a journalist (Q):

Example 5
Q: Since your revelation about this
Mr Lockart: What's a revelation?
Q: It's in the Bible (Laughter)

In a second example (Partington 2006: 133), Mr Fleischer's first comment in its rather unusual vagueness is itself a laughable that is not taken up but his second straight forward definition of noon is taken to be a laughable in the context of his previous remark:

Example 6
Mr Fleischer. ……. I think it's going to be midday, midday-ish
Q   Do you mean noon, or 2 pm.
Mr Fleischer   Noon is a good description of midday (laughter)

Both these examples feature utterances that clearly are not offered seriously; they have little or no bearing on the business of the meeting. They might be contrasted with the following example of wit from Holmes & Marra (2002: 66) in which Beth, a manager, addresses her administrative assistant with the aim of getting a meeting under way. Here there is an underlying seriousness stated in a non-serious manner:

Example 7
Beth   OK Marion I'm afraid serious affairs of state will have to wait, we have some trivial issues
            needing our attention (Laughter)

Again, by way of contrast, an example from Partington (2006: 84) comprises a matter-of-fact expression of thanks for a correction:

Example 8
Q1: Why have there been no consequences for Secretary Rubin publicly criticising the steel –
Q2: O'Neill
Q1: O'Neill
Q1: Oh, Secretary O'Neill, thank you (Laughter)

This example would appear to be one of the classes of non-serious remark that relates to Long & Graesser's social selves. Another example from Partington (2006: 159) is an entirely inappropriate command from a journalist to the White House Press Secretary:

Example 9
Q: Can I have one more on the mid-East, though? Do you mind? Don't answer that?
                (Laughter)
Mr Fleischer: Kelly, you may have your ninth question

Finally, there is an instance of teasing again eliciting laughter:

Example 10
Q: Ari, I have a follow up. My other one, my second one, Ari –
Mr Fleischer: How can you have a follow up when I didn't answer your first question? (Laughter)

In line with Glenn's original view of laughables, the range of content and varieties of illocutionary force in these unmarked utterances that elicited laughter are clearly evident in these examples: declarations, requests, demands, expressions of gratitude. There is virtually none that could be said to be funny when read in isolation, yet there was no evidence from the transcripts that by laughing listeners were mistaken in treating them as non-serious utterances. One vague feature that does emerge is that the utterances were generally unexpected. In some cases, it was the verbal construction of the utterance, in others the overall linguistic context set by topic or prior utterances, and in some the social context with respect to the personal or social identity of the speaker.

As was suggested above, when introducing laughter as an indexical (Section 2.1), unexpected moments within ongoing talk may represent deliberate flouting of Gricean conversational maxims. Both Raskin (1985: 100-104) and Attardo (1993) utilised conversational maxims to examine joke telling as a form of *non-bona fide* communication, but it is also possible that in everyday talk occasional instances of flouting may 'pop up' that are not framed as jokes. It is also likely that there are conversational maxims that pertain to particular relationships. Lampert & Ervin-Tripp (2006: 53), for example, described instances of teases that constituted breaches of the maxims of informativeness and relevance and extended their analysis to account for the insults that are often exchanged between close friends. Among the foregoing examples, Beth's formulation of a request to Marion to start the meeting and the unanticipated command by the journalist in addressing the White House press secretary, both violated maxims specific to talk between interlocutors of differing status. Critically, violation alone is insufficient for the utterance to be characterised non-seriously; the subject matter and occasion of talk and other wider contextual factors will be pertinent.

4. Solitary laughter by the speaker

In distinguishing between listener and speaker laughter, two obvious points emerge when we treat laughter as an indexical. When listener laughter is directed towards an unmarked speaker's utterance, that is one that lacks laughter, the characterisation of its lack of seriousness must inevitably incorporate an element of uncertainty. If the listener laughter itself could be said to have its own illocutionary force, then it would reflect that doubt and be described as an acknowledgement or confirmation of the speaker's lack of seriousness. These designations correspond to the transient deferential position of the listener within any interaction regarding certain information (Heritage 2012). In stark contrast, when the speaker refers to his or her own utterance with laughter, the matter of doubt can be laid aside. The speaker declares or affirms that his or her utterance should not be taken seriously and in so doing addresses the listener in a manner that signifies a preference for solidarity. It remains a matter for the listener to accept or

decline the speaker's non-serious stance and his or her declared preference for solidarity and, in the case of solitary speaker laughter, the listener declines.

4.1. Examples of solitary speaker laughter

Jefferson (1979: 84) was the first to explore in some depth instances of the listener failing to join the laughter of a speaker. An example from her early study follows:

Example 11
Gene: So that shook the old (h)house(h)hold up fer a(h)whi(h)le heh
Patty: Oh yes I c'n imagine

A second example of solitary speaker laughter is taken from Haakana (2002: 128) during an interaction between a doctor and patient. Although the doctor does talk with a 'smiley voice', he provides no audible laughter despite two instances of the patient offering speaker laughter:

Example 12
Doctor: You have a finger injury
Patient: Yeah Hell I was just chuckling to myself that it seems like every year (h) or two heheheh hhh A (h) nd a(h)l(h)w(h)ays the righ(h)t h(h)and(h)
Doctor: Really but it's just a diff the finger changes

As with solitary listener laughter, comparatively few studies have isolated solitary speaker laughter but there is a general consensus that in dyadic interaction solitary speaker laughter is usually the most frequent form of laughter bout (e.g., Adelsward 1989; Vettin & Todt 2004). Consequently, there are little data that would allow us to establish any associations between the frequency of solitary speaker laughter and roles or relationships. Adelsward identified more solitary speaker laughter among defendants being interviewed as part of a research project in a research interview but more solitary speaker laughter among female interviewers during employment interviews. Glenn (2010) also found that interviewers in employment interviews tended to offer more speaker laughter than interviewees. There is a suggestion that in doctor-patient interaction it is the latter who offer more solitary speaker laughter (Haakana 2002). Smoski & Bachorowski (2003a; 2003b) could find no more solitary laughter among friends than among strangers and no gender differences in an experimental game playing task designed to elicit laughter. McLachlan (2021) did, however, find a tendency for females when talking to other females of equal status to offer more solitary speaker laughter than equivalent males during experimental discussions of life dilemmas.

4.2. Implications of solitary speaker laughter

This pattern of data defies simple explanation. Attempts to explain the differences in the amounts of solitary speaker laughter based on a simple function of who talks more or who occupies the dominant role cannot be sustained. Although higher frequencies of speaker laughter were identified among higher status employment interviewers (Glenn 2010) and the defendants being interviewed for research (Adelsward 1989), it was also the case that patients tended to offer more solitary speaker laughter than doctors (Haakana 2002). Friendship or familiarity appears to have little effect and gender differences are inconsistent.

A complicating factor in accounting for rates of solitary speaker laughter is whether the listener joins in or not. Joint laughter as function of the preferences of both parties: the incidence of solitary speaker laughter reflects the speaker's preference for non-serious interaction and solidarity and the listener's preference to maintain a degree of distance. In an effort to account

for the likelihood of a listener joining in with speaker laughter, it is necessary to return to the nature of a laughable. In particular, the potency of a laughable, marked or unmarked, with regard to the listener's acceptance of the laughable requires some consideration.

4.3. Laughables: declarations to demands

Jefferson (e.g., Jefferson 1979; Jefferson et al. 1987) and the CA school generally (e.g., Glenn 2003: 53-66; Glenn 2010: 1486-1487) took speaker laughter to be an implicit invitation to the listener to join in the laughter and thereby affiliate with the speaker. However, it was also argued that speaker laughter that referred to certain types of talk such as "troubles" might not constitute an invitation (Jefferson 1984). More recently, it has been acknowledged within the CA tradition that speaker laughter in talk other than troubles does not necessarily constitute an invitation to join in (e.g., Glenn 2010: 1496). Unlike much of the original Jefferson research that typically involved casual conversations among friends (e.g., Jefferson 1979), studies of talk in occasions in which non-seriousness is less likely have demonstrated that frequencies of solitary speaker laughter are high (e.g., Adelsward 1989). It is unlikely that we would detect such high rates of solitary speaker laughter if they were invitations. Consistent refusal of invitations would cause the speaker to lose face (see Davidson 1984; Brown & Levinson 1987: 40), so it seems more plausible that often speakers are simply declaring or perhaps tentatively offering their fellow interlocutors the possibility of solidarity. Their expressed preference for solidarity is not accompanied by any confident expectation that it will be taken up by the listener.

In the following example from Rees & Monrouxe (2010: 3392), the doctor provides two declarative utterances marked by laughter with which the patient fails to join, while the patient offers an unmarked humorous laughable that the doctor does not take up. Three laughables are provided but in no case does the listener laugh, suggesting both doctor and patient are content to declare their preferences for non-serious interaction without any obvious inclination to confirm that solidarity by joining the laughter. The fact that both are males, who are generally recognised to favour greater social distance, might also be a factor.

> *Example 13*
> Patient: How did you know it (the pain) was there?
> Doctor: They told me – that's why (.) huh huh huh huh
> Patient: What've you got – Morse Code or something?
> Doctor: No they told me beforehand ahu huh huh (.) ….

The example above is also interesting in so far as, typically, low status interlocutors, such as the patient in this interaction, feel obliged to take up laughables. Possibly the patient was reluctant to explicitly acknowledge the doctor's admission and preferred instead to implicitly acknowledge it with his own laughable utterance. As will be seen in the following example, however, high status can increase the force of laughables from simple declarations to invitations to requests, even demands, to join in.

Jefferson (2004: 127-128) provides a detailed account of an interaction in which status appears to play a significant role. Maury, a male senior physician, is addressing Fran, a female intern, during their medical rounds. Fran initially declines Maury's invitation to join in (see lines 1 to 4 below) but finally 'caves in' (end of line 5):

> *Example 14*
> (1) Maury   … and if we knew she had alpha one anatrypsin deficiency. What could we do differently? (0.2)
> (2) Maury   You might ask   hhh[heh heh heh]

(3) Fran   [Right   ]
(4) Maury   [heh heh heh heh] . h [hhh   m e h h h   heh heh heh heh]   [hhhh
(5) Fran.   [Exactly   ]   [.hhhnn   What would we do for her   ] ehhhhheh [eh hhh

It is unlikely that Fran would have acquiesced to Maury's prolonged and persistent laughter had Maury not been of such relatively high status. This suggests Maury's marked laughable could warrant the designation of a demand to join in.

Both examples demonstrate that often laughables are not simple invitations, even when marked with laughter. At one extreme, the laughable may simply signify a declaration that the speaker does not mean his utterance to be taken seriously and that he would prefer solidarity. At the other end of the spectrum, as in the Jefferson example above (14), a scarcely laughable utterance marked by prolonged laughter from a high-status interlocutor might best be taken as a demand.

In summary, the factors that determine the extent to which a laughable can elicit laughter require more study. Status has an important role as was evident in the Maury and Fran example. High status laughables, particularly those marked by laughter, are likely to be more potent than the same laughables uttered by low status interlocutors. The basic content and illocutionary force of the laughable utterance is also likely to play a part but not perhaps as large as one might imagine. Jefferson (1984) argued that when a person was relating her troubles, an utterance with laughter rarely invited laughter. In contrast, Fabish (2014) cites an example of a speaker relating a troubling issue non-seriously. Using a number of marked laughables, a Maori colleague of Fabish recounted a childhood incident in which she was chased by Skinheads. Fabish, as the listener, declined the invitation and did not respond with laughter. According to Fabish, her failure to accept the offer of solidarity was taken as a signifier of social distance by her colleague. The contrasting examples from Jefferson and Fabish show that caution must be exercised in using the content and illocutionary force of laughables to establish the degree of obligation on the listener to acknowledge the laughable. It would seem then that the determination of the metacommunicative illocutionary force of laughables, to coin a phrase, is not a simple matter. The content of the utterance, the manner in which it is delivered, and the relationship between the interlocutors will all play a role.

5. Joint laughter

Joint laughter occurs when interlocutors overlap their laughter or when one reciprocates the laughter of another with little or no discernible time lag between the first and subsequent laughter. Nwokah et al. (1994) initially distinguished between these two types of laughter but found only small differences between them and most subsequent quantitative research has included both overlapping laughter and reciprocal laughter as joint laughter (e.g., Bryant et al. 2016). In nearly all joint laughter, one person laughs first (Adelsward 1989: 115; Nwokah et al. 1994: 27), usually the speaker. This staggered start to joint laughter strongly suggests that when the listener joins in the speaker laughter, the second laugh as an indexical refers to the laughable marked with laughter. This can be observed in the example below taken from an employment interview (Glenn 2010: 1489). In this illustration Maya, the interviewee, accepts the offer to join in the marked laughable provided by the interviewer, Jill:

Example 15
Jill: ………..in case you ever wanted to go get another degree so hh [heh   heh   heh]
Maya: [ehh huh huh .hh]

Less commonly, the speaker will join in the laughter of the listener who has taken up the unmarked laughable of the speaker, as in the example below from McLachlan (2021). Two female staff are discussing a life dilemma and, although the timing is fine, the first particle of the speaker's laughter follows the first particle of laughter by the listener:

Example 16
(B): That's the university PhD =
(A)   = I chose Q +
(B)   = I chose Q as w[ell he (h)](h)
(A)   [ha ha ha]

Virtually no research has distinguished between speaker initiated joint laughter and listener initiated joint laughter and evidence from McLachlan (2021) suggests there are no particular differences between the two. Both forms of joint laughter mark a transformation of solitary laughter into a discrete signifier of solidarity. The preference for solidarity of the first person is realised as actual solidarity when the second person joins in. Joint laughter, therefore, has distinctive implications for the interlocutors' relationships that is not evident in solitary laughter. The exponents of CA and sociolinguistic and pragmatic approaches to laughter (e.g., Jefferson et al. 1987; Holmes 2006) have always maintained this position but within the psychological and the biological approaches, the distinction between solitary and joint laughter has often not been made. The following examples represent the few efforts made in this direction using a quantitative methodology.

Smoski & Bachorowski (2003a; 2003b) have shown that friends engage in more frequent joint laughter than strangers during experimental games designed to prompt laughter. Kurtz & Algoe (2017) also found that shared laughter was linked to subsequent judgements of affiliation. McLachlan (2021), on the other hand, found no effect of friendship on rates of joint laughter in dyads discussing more serious life dilemma, although there was a clear indication that female dyads produced more speaker initiated joint laughter. Smoski & Bachorowski, for their part, found no gender differences in joint laughter. Adelsward (1989) found that in employee interviews 44% of all laughter bouts of successful applicants were instances of joint laughter compared with only 33% of unsuccessful applicants.

There is sufficient empirical evidence, therefore, to conclude that joint laughter is used to signify solidarity, but only when the occasion allows it. Females' preference for solidary interaction marked by joint laughter was observed in occasions when laughter was only sporadic. In contrast, friends may be more inclined to display solidarity through joint laughter during occasions when play is fostered. The successful job applicants demonstrated high levels of joint laughter when it was important to enhance solidarity. In passing, Bryant et al. (2016) showed that the acoustic character of decontextualised joint laughter among friends was distinguishable from joint laughter among strangers. This largely confirms the case being made here, that joint laughter is a discrete sign of realised solidarity that should not be merged with solitary laughter.

5.1. Asymmetry in the initiation of joint laughter

Assuming joint laughter typically marks solidarity, a second set of findings regarding who initiates that joint laughter is revealing in terms of the relative status of the interlocutors. Much of this research involved doctor–patient interactions and showed that there was a small but consistent tendency for patients to join in the laughter of doctors more frequently than doctors joined in the laughter of patients (Coser 1959; West 1984; Haakana 2002). Glenn (2010) also found interviewees joined in the laughter of interviewers more than the reverse, as did

Adelsward (1989) in her interviews of convicted fraudsters. McLachlan (2021) found that female students joined in the speaker laughter of female staff almost twice as often as female staff joined in the speaker laughter of students. This did not occur with male staff and students. Finally, Smoski & Bachorowski (2003a) found that females joined in the laughter of their male partners significantly more often than males joined in the laughter of their female partners.

As was anticipated in Section 3.2, a parsimonious way of accounting for this asymmetry in initiating joint laughter is in terms of the respective status of the interlocutors: low status members of the dyad tending to join in the speaker laughter of the higher status member more often than the high-status joins in the laughter of the low status member. It must be noted that Adelsward (1989: 124) argued that it was the low social status of the defendants which gave rise to the asymmetry, although, if this was the case, her results would run counter to all the other studies cited. As was suggested in relation to her data on solitary listener laughter, a strong case can be made that in the research interview it was the defendant who enjoyed a high 'local' status. If this interpretation is accepted then Adelsward's results correspond exactly to the status linked asymmetry found in all other studies: low status interlocutors join in the laughter of high status more frequently than the reverse.

The simplest explanation of this asymmetry, then, is that low status interlocutors are obliged as listeners to defer more consistently to the marked laughables of high-status interlocutors (Stevanovic 2018). The implications of this simple deferral are notable as it results in both parties working together such that the high-status person initiates the signifier of solidarity far more often than the low status. This asymmetry in offering gestures of solidarity requires further consideration.

5.2. Laughter exchange and pronominal forms of address

West (1984: 128-131) in her sample of US doctors talking to their patients argued that the asymmetry in initiating joint laughter corresponded to the manner in which doctors and patients exchanged titles and names. Just as the doctor initiated more of the joint laughter as a sign of solidarity, the doctors used the more 'familiar' first names, while patients never did. Patients used the formal 'sir' or title and surname. West had noted that this asymmetry corresponded to one component of Brown & Ford's (1961) analysis of terms of address as well as Brown & Gilman's (1960) seminal examination of the use of the informal or intimate T and the formal or polite V version of the second person pronoun in several European languages (see also Brown 1965). This pattern of usage of the close, Thou, and the distant, You, was also found in English up until the 17th Century (e.g., Lynn Adams & Harré 2001).

Brown & Gilman originally framed their account of TV exchange to explain how fixed status may be realised during interaction (see also Hodge & Kress 1988: 40-46; Silverstein 2003: 204-211). Symmetrical exchange occurred when polite, high status individuals exchanged the formal V version indicating social distance between the interlocutors. Symmetry was also evident when low status interlocutors exchanged the informal T version marking solidarity. Critically, asymmetry occurred when a high-status person addressed a low status person using the intimate T form but the low status person addressed the high-status other using the formal V version. Friedrich (1972) using the T/V forms of address as described in classic Russian literature has extended this scheme to explain more transient changes in the relationship of participants within the course of a single conversation. Mühlhäusler & Harré (1990) also argued for an extended application of the symmetrical and asymmetrical forms of address as well as suggesting that the demise of these signifiers in English had resulted in the emergence of alternative means of marking solidarity and status in English. It is possible that asymmetrical initiation of joint laughter might be one such expressive device with both parties working to

ensure the solidary signifier of joint laughter is offered by the high-status person. The low status interlocutor is left to offer solitary laughter signifying a preference for solidarity that is not realised by joint laughter as the high-status interlocutor declines to join in.

It appears, therefore, that asymmetrical patterns of joint laughter signify status in two ways: first, the low status listener more regularly accepts the marked laughable of the high status other than the reverse; and secondly, by virtue of these differences in likelihood of acceptance, high status interlocutors initiate joint laughter signifying solidarity more often than low status interlocutors, who are left offering more distant solitary laughter. Both parties are engaged in the production of status during the talk.

6.   Laughing at (someone)

There are few examples in research of people clearly laughing at another person present during an interaction. This is ample testament to the humiliation experienced by a person who is not taken seriously as an individual – someone of no consequence. Examples of mockery are more common but as will be shown, mockery, like teasing, usually occurs among interlocutors who expect their solidary relationship to continue. Haugh (2010: 2109) offers an example of mockery in which two male students come close to laughing at the concern of a female friend who is bemoaning her busy schedule for the following day:

Example 17
Sally: I've got so much to do tomorrow
Tony: Mm o::::h
Greg: o:::h (0.2)
Sally: I have to ring channel [seven
Greg: [Your whole life is lost
Tony: Ha ha
Sally: It is

There is no clear indication that Sally is not serious in her assessment of her day and Greg's laughable overstatement of her plight effectively challenges her stance. Critically, he does not laugh at her complaint although Tony does so indirectly by acknowledging Greg's laughable and marking his preferred solidarity with Greg. Sally does not accept the laughable restatement and fails to join in the laughter, although her subsequent agreement with his overstatement does show her alignment with Greg's non-serious characterisation of her earlier complaint. Haugh's example of mockery stands in stark contrast to the following illustration of laughing at another.

Barnes (2012: 247-248) provides the example taken from a classroom discussion of violence lead by Paul, the teacher, and involving a small number of largely working-class adolescent boys. The target of the laughter is Kevin, a marginal member of the class, "overweight" and "unathletic", who is known to take his work seriously. In this particular episode, Paul is seeking more examples of when you might "'feel fear'":

Example 18
Paul: C'mon, tell me another (pause) Kevin
Kevin: Well you might be a bit scared sometimes at night walking home on your own from the pub or somewhere … (laughter)
Sean: He wouldn't even get into a pub (laughter)
Gavin: Not a hope Girlie (laughter & jeering)

In this serious discussion, before which Paul, as their teacher, had warned the class that they were not to laugh at one another, Paul addresses Kevin knowing that he alone among the class is likely to supply an example of feeling fear. There is no indication in Kevin's response that he is anything but serious but through their laughter the remaining class members are unanimous in characterising his utterance as non-serious. Arguably, although Kevin's talk is the referent for their non-serious qualification, their laughter as a mode of address is primarily directed at their fellow class members, not at the source of the utterance. It is their joint laughter that signifies solidarity to the exclusion of Kevin and Paul. Sean's reference to Kevin in the third person confirms that the interaction following Kevin's utterance is confined to the rest of the class. Gavin does address Kevin but only to insult him.

An additional point might be made. It is not impossible to imagine one of the other class members providing just this example and prompting laughter from his colleagues, but in this case it would be clear to the class that his entirely unexpected remark was not meant seriously. The very idea that 'one of the lads' would admit in the classroom to feeling fear is laughable and, having provided this laughable, the 'lad' might well confirm its non-seriousness by joining in. In this case, the laughter of the class would be addressed to the source of the laughable (see also McKenzie 2017: 286-287)

In summary, the two functions of laughter as an indexical, its designation of talk as non-serious, and its use as a mode of address, can assist in distinguishing examples of laughing at from examples of teasing and mockery. Additional aspects of the talk need to be taken into account, particularly the existing relationships between interlocutors and the content of the interaction. Both aspects will be important in evaluating unexpected utterances and the likelihood of the speaker being serious.

7. Implications

The aim of this review was to establish a strong case in favour of treating laughter as an indexical. Two closely allied but analytically distinct properties of laughter as an indexical have been utilised: that of characterising the talk to which the laughter refers as non-serious and that of addressing another in a solidary fashion. The referent property has allowed us to shift the burden of explaining the vast range of what can be achieved by laughter on to the content of the talk to which the laughter refers. At the same time, taking laughter as a mode of address has enabled us to discern how it can be used to modulate both status and solidarity depending on who offers the laughter, speaker or listener, whether or not the laughter is reciprocated, and the laughable talk to which the laughter refers. It has also allowed us to account for 'laughing at'. In summary, treating laughter as an indexical allows us to explain how interlocutors actually use laughter to modulate their relationship, while, at the same time, dealing with the complexities of the matter in hand.

This expressivist explanation may be contrasted with the traditional accounts of laughter that hold that laughter is a simple external manifestation of positive affect. This notion of laughter corresponds to the representational view of language, generally, which holds that the meaning of sentences is built up from individual words, each of which represents a part of the non-linguistic 'world' (see Price 2013: 8-10). As was noted in the introduction, this form of account is adequate to explain amusement and friendly talk, when the laughter is associated with positive affective states, but it has particular difficulties in explaining the association of laughter with negative states such as nervousness, embarrassment and sycophancy (Edmonson 1987: 28).

Attempts to salvage a representational account of laughter have sought to identify a vocabulary of laughter with each distinct psychological state represented by a different form of

laughter. For example, Szameitat et al. (2009: 400-401) claimed to have demonstrated that listeners could reliably distinguish between the laughter associated with various scenarios such as joy, tickling, taunting and schadenfreude. Critically, however, the laughter was not based on the behaviour of participants engaged in these scenarios but was generated by actors asked to imagine them. On the other hand, using conversational laughter, Tanaka & Campbell (2014) identified different acoustic qualities of 'polite' and 'mirthful' laughter; Bryant et al. (2016) found that joint laughter among friends was different from joint laughter among strangers; while Oveis et al. (2016) confirmed that dominant laughter could be reliably distinguished from submissive laughter irrespective of the person occupying the roles. While these findings are of note, their limited scope and the possibility that all three binary categories of polite and mirthful, familiar and unfamiliar, and dominant and submissive laughter could be attributed to the relative intensity of the laughter, raises the question of how far the attempt to develop a vocabulary of laughter can be taken.

Over thirty years after Edmonson (1987), in failing to classify laughter into different types based on its acoustic qualities, argued that laughter should be analysed in terms of its context, Bryant et al. (2018: 1523), leading exponents of the evolutionary approach to laughter, also concluded that "future work should therefore examine the complexities of how laughter interacts with language use". Both Edmonson's and Bryant et al.'s conclusions reflect the comparative failure to establish the comprehensive vocabulary of laughter that would be expected on the basis of the representational view of laughter and anticipate the sort of pragmatic analysis attempted here. This explanatory shift precisely parallels the gradual demise of representationalism in explanations of our understanding of language, and its replacement with expressive, pragmatically oriented ideas (see Price 2013).

7.1. Unresolved issues

Inevitably, many matters raised by this review demand further research and analysis. One of the most immediate is whether there is a syntax of laughter. Most laughter occupies a place at or near the end of a speaker's utterance, while listener laughter occurs early in the turn as a response to the speaker's talk. There are, however, not infrequent instances of laughter occurring within speech (e.g., Potter & Hepburn 2010), and a few examples of it occurring early in the turn but not referring to a previous utterance (e.g., Gavioli 1995). Whether the position of laughter within the utterance alters the relative importance of its discourse deictic and social deictic functions deserves study. Interpolated laughter may be almost exclusively discourse deictic rendering the utterance more declarative and less invitational than laughter at the end of the turn, which may be principally social deictic. A second issue is how far an extended and systematic application of Gricean conversational maxims would be able to account for laughable utterances. An extended set of maxims along the lines suggested by Grice (1975: 47) to include those pertaining to particular relationships and the possible use of laughter as a simple sign breaching the maxim of quality are ideas worth pursuing. The context in which flouting conversational of maxims is taken seriously as opposed to non-seriously must constitute part of such an analysis.

There are unquestionably more areas of research worth pursuing but it is contended that these developments should rely on the basic premise that laughter acts as an indexical with both discourse and social functions such that its significance can only be grasped in terms of the context in which it is embedded. Only this approach allows for a full account of the many ways in which laughter is employed during everyday talk.

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