Research Paper

The Organization and Functions of Laughter in a Japanese Face-to-Face Interaction

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This paper examines laughter as an interactional resource, focusing on how and where it occurs, what it does, and how it is oriented to by the co-participant. The discourse data come from a face-to-face interview conducted in Japanese. Through a close examination of laugh instances, the following recurrent phenomena emerged: (1) potentially face-threatening questions are routinely asked with in-speech laughter and are followed by the recipient's laughter; (2) utterances about the speaker's own trouble are almost always produced with turn-final in-speech or post-utterance laughter and are joined by the recipient's laughter. Laughter was found to be a systematic, socially organized activity that both reinforces the participants' alignment and contributes to the accomplishment of the institutional goal of the interview.

Key words: laughter, Japanese, interview, resource, affiliation

日本語対面状況における笑いの構造と機能

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従来、相互行為における笑いは主に会話分析の枠組みの中で研究されてきた。本稿では日本語の二者対面状況の中で笑いという行為がいかになされ、どのような結果をもたらすかを、あるインタビューの事例を通じて具体的に検証する。

分析の対象としたのは、フェミニスト刊行物の編集者が読者ボランティアに対して行ったインタビューである。基本的な価値観を共有する二者間のやりとりを細かく検討した結果、以下の現象が観察された。

①ディレクトな内容に関する質問は笑いと共に発せられ、受け手の笑いをも引き起こす。
②話者自身のトラブルを披露する発話の終了地点付近での、必ずと言ってよいほど笑いが発せられ、受け手も笑いで応じる。

相互行為における笑いは偶発的なものではなく、組織的に産出され、またコミュニケーションの次の展開に影響を及ぼすリソースとなる。本データでは、笑いが参加者の一体感を高めつつ、インタビューの目的達成に貢献している様子が観察された。

キーワード：笑い、日本語、インタビュー、リソース、一体感

1. Introduction

Participants in communicative exchanges employ various devices to achieve their interactional goals. Laughter is one of those things. Traditionally, linguists have not paid attention to laughter because referential definition is problematic for such non-lexical vocalizations and because they seem incidental and trivial. However, laughter is a highly significant feature of interaction to participants themselves (Ellis, 1997), and has been studied by researchers interested in the dynamic processes of spoken discourse. Indeed, it has been found that laughter may not be just the idiosyncratic flooding out of emotions, but can be the product of methodic, systematic, and coordinated activities (Jefferson, 1984, 1985). In addition, it was found that "laughter is very carefully placed by participants during the
course of their talk to achieve a range of interactional tasks” (Ellis, 1997, p.147). It is important to note that laughter is a socially organized phenomenon not only in the way in which it is produced, but also in the way it is attended to by co-participants in the interaction.

This paper examines laughter as an interactional resource that deserves close attention in terms of how and where it occurs, as well as what it does. I focus on a particular type of talk, an interview conducted in Japanese by an editor of a feminist publication of a Tokyo-based non-profit organization. I wish to show how interviewer-initiated laughter and the subsequent shared laughter contribute to the construction of alignment and affinity between two interactants while achieving the institutional goals of the organization.

2. Previous Research on Laughter

Laughter in naturally occurring interaction has mainly been studied in the framework of conversation analysis.

2.1 Functions of Laughter

Levinson (1983) treats laughter as a unit that can occur as an utterance and perform appropriate responses to utterances. Other researchers have pointed out that laughter has multiple functions and clearly does more than just respond to utterances. The functions identified thus far can be divided into three broad categories that are not necessarily mutually exclusive, namely, those related to contextualization (Gumperz, 1977), interactional management (e.g., Lerner, 1996), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Ellis, 1997).

The functions of laughter particularly relevant to the present study include contextualization, or the signaling of interpretative frames of talk occurring with laughter. It can signal the non-serious or playful nature of talk (Ellis, 1997; Jefferson, 1984; Norrick, 1993). Nishizaka (1997) contends that laughter at the end of an utterance instructs its recipient how to respond to the utterance. Laughter can serve as a powerful contextualization cue and affect the way the subsequent interaction is managed.

Laughter has multiple functions affecting interpersonal relationships as well. Its remedial function (Goffman, 1981; Gavioli, 1995) is particularly relevant to the present data. Laughter can remedy gaffes, mistakes, and misunderstandings by signaling the speaker’s awareness of her or his own mistake, often introducing an excuse. It can also display either alignment or distancing (Glenn, 1995). Shared laughter in conversation helps participants achieve affiliation (Ellis, 1997; Jefferson, 1979). It can also signal appreciation, enjoyment, and approval (Jefferson, 1972). A laugh can be seen as indicating a non-aggressive intention or mitigating a violation of conversational conventions (Ellis, 1997). This function is closely related to the notion of face. Stewart (1997) argues that laughter can intensify or diminish the force of a face-threatening action. A laugh can also present a self with an ability to laugh at one’s own problems and overcome them (Norrick, 1993).

As shown above, laughter has numerous functions; therefore, ambiguity is inherent in it (Jefferson, 1972). The specific function of an instance of laughter can only be determined based upon its particular contextual and structural features.

2.2 The Organization of Laughter

Prior research has distinguished “post-utterance completion laughter” from “in-speech laughter” (Jefferson, 1979; Lerner, 1996), and “turn-initial” from “turn-final” laughter (Gavioli, 1995). Jefferson (1979) found that one technique used by a speaker to invite recipient laughter is to place the laugh just at the completion point of an utterance. Gavioli investigated the placement of laughter in dispreferred responses in English and in Italian, and suggests that the preferred organization of such turns might be culture-specific (i.e., laughter was recurrently turn-initial in English, but turn-final in Italian). In addition to the placement of laughter, who (i.e., speaker or listener) initiates laughter and who does or does not join are crucial factors.

2.3 Recipient’s Action Subsequent to Laughter

Instances of laughter are meaningfully understood by co-participants and lead to
conversational consequences accordingly. For example, one can either ignore it or join in (Jefferson, 1972). One’s role or interpretation of the situation affects the way one attends to the laugh instance. Jefferson (1984), for example, has found that in an episode of troubles-telling, “properly aligned troubles-recipient does not treat the teller’s laughter as an occasion to participate in a laughing together” (p.367).

In sum, the previous research has shown that laughter is a socially organized activity with a certain degree of regularity in the way it occurs.

3. Method and Data

3.1 Data Collection

The discourse data used for this study come from a sixty-minute interview in Japanese. The data were collected by videotaping the interview in which Kawano, a Japanese graduate student studying in the U.S., was interviewed by Shiraishi, an editor of a publication of a feminist non-profit organization in Tokyo. Kawano was working as a volunteer for the organization when the interview was conducted. The purpose of the interview, as explicitly stated by Shiraishi at the beginning of the interview, was to collect some preliminary and first-hand information about a Japanese woman studying abroad as the organization had seen growing interest in studying abroad among their readers and Japanese women in general.

3.2 Basic Characteristics of the Data

The data are institutional discourse in that (1) the occasioning of the interaction was externally motivated, (2) many of the questions asked by the interviewer had been prepared in advance to meet the institutional goals of the organization, and (3) the format was structured in such a way as to maximize the amount of information elicited from the interviewee. The interaction was mainly in the question-and-answer format typical of interviews. However, Kawano occasionally asked Shiraishi’s opinions rather than simply providing information, and there were moments when both participants “digressed.” Shiraishi spoke both as a representative of the institution and as an individual who shares personal interests with her interviewee. Kawano shifted between the roles of interviewee and fellow feminist as well.

Overall, the interaction is characterized as cooperative. There are numerous instances in which Kawano makes sure that she has provided the kind of answer Shiraishi was looking for. Also, the use of back-channeling was frequent, confirming the finding of previous research (e.g., Maynard, 1986). Co-construction of syntactic units (i.e., one participant’s completion of a sentence started by another participant), another feature of Japanese conversation (e.g., Mizutani, 1984), is also present in the data. In sum, a great deal of evidence has been found that the two participants actively collaborate in Kawano’s construction of stories elicited by Shiraishi. It appears that the two feminists’ shared assumptions about gender inequality in Japan greatly contribute to the friendly manner in which the interaction proceeded. Instances abound in which they are clearly aligned in their beliefs and values.

The interaction is characterized not only by rapport but also by some degree of formality and psychological distance. The interview begins and ends with both parties’ bowing to each other, and most of the sentence endings are polite/formal/distal in style although some style shifts are observed.

With these overall characteristics of the interaction in mind, I now present and discuss examples containing laughter.

4. Laughter in the Present Data

Two recurrent phenomena are observed in the present data. First, Shiraishi’s questions are routinely produced with in-speech laughter when she asks something that is potentially too personal or intrusive. This kind of laughter is followed by Kawano’s laughter, resulting in shared laughter, and Kawano’s laughter is typically followed by a remark that justifies Shiraishi’s “abrasive” question. Second, Kawano’s utterances containing delicate pieces of information about herself or her own past/future trouble are always produced with either turn-final in-speech laughter or post-utterance laughter, and are joined by Shiraishi’s laughter. This contradicts Jefferson’s finding (1984)
that the troubles-teller's laughter is not joined in by
the recipient. Now, let us examine some examples
for each category.

4.1 Questions Asking for Delicate Information
and Responses to Them

4.1.1 Questions Asking for Delicate Information
(Example 1) Educational background [00:31]
Shiraishi: De Kawano san te: ima doko no
daigaku b
and Kawano Ms. QT now where LK
university
And which university are you at now

This exchange takes place immediately
following Shiraishi's statement of the purpose of the
interview. For many Japanese people who believe
that the ranking of the college or university one
attends plays a significant role in who one is, this
question may be considered "delicate," and would
not be asked by a person whom one does not know
well. It should be noted that the crucial part of
the above question is produced with laughter. Laughter
has no apparent constraints on its placement within
syntactic structures (Ellis, 1997) because one can
vocalize a lexical item with a laugh quality. This
feature of laughter makes it a versatile and powerful
interactional resource that can be utilized to add
another meaning to the verbal message produced
with a laughing quality. In the above example, the
placement of the laugh appears to indicate that it is
not accidental, but is related to the content of the
utterance.

(Example 2) Savings [21:51]
Shiraishi: Ikura gurai tameteta n (...) de (...) su (...)
ka:::
how-much about had-saved NOM COP Q
About how much money had you
save-d::: (before going to the U.S.)?

This question has some distinctive features.
First, the phrase "tametetandesuka," which is
normally pronounced without pauses within it, is
uttered with three pauses. Second, the vowel of
the question marker "ka" is markedly prolonged.
Third, Shiraishi keeps her gaze down as she utters
the "abrasive" part of her question until she looks
up and shifts her gaze toward Kawano at the "ka,"
a sentence-final question marker. The playful
manner in which this question is produced appears
to show Shiraishi's belief that special work needs to
be done in asking this particular question.

The interviewer's questions seeking delicate
information are potentially threatening to both
Kawano's negative and positive face-wants (Brown
& Levinson, 1987). Laughter during the course of
asking delicate questions can be seen as a politeness
strategy which mitigates the face-threat.

Now that we have seen the mitigating function
of laughter by the interviewer, let us examine how
the laughter is taken up by the interviewee, using
extended versions of the same examples.

4.1.2 Responses to Questions Asking for Delicate
Information
(Example 1) Educational background
Shiraishi: De Kawano san te: ima doko no
daigaku ku
and Kawano Ms. QT now where LK
university
And which university are you at now
Kawano: [E?] Ima doko no daiga- A (...)
hai daigaku no naame kara
huh? now where LK univ- oh yes
university LK name from
Huh? Now which univ- Oh, yes. (We
start with) the university name
Shiraishi: Hai.
Yes.

Kawano's turn begins at the point where she
attempts to figure out what Shiraishi is asking
about. The interjection "E?" indicates that the
content of the question was unexpected. Kawano
repeats a part of Shiraishi's question before she
utters "a hai (oh, yes)." This suggests that when
Kawano laughed, she did not know what Shiraishi
was laughing about. Instead, Kawano's laughter at
this point appears to have been triggered by her
co-participant's laughter even before she figures out
its meaning. Kawano then repeats a part of
Shiraishi's immediately prior utterance, and makes
a meta-linguistic comment about the procedure of
the interview. This commentary is produced with

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laughter, which appears to be functioning as an indicator of her acceptance of Shiraishi’s rather “inappropriate” question.

(Example 2) Savings
Shiraishi: Ikura gurai tameteta n (.) de (.) [su (.) ka:::
how-much about had_saved NOM COP Q
About how much money had you sa-ve-d::: (before going to the U.S.)?
Kawano: [E ::::
(.) e, so:nnna koto mo kiku n desu ka
toka itte
huh um such thing also ask NOM COP Q
and-such say
Wha:::t. Um, do you ask such a thing too? I’m kidding.

Again, Kawano comments on the content of Shiraishi’s question, expressing her surprise that Shiraishi would ask such a personal question. This comment could be interpreted by Shiraishi as accusatory, but the laughter over the utterance indicates that no harm is intended by Kawano. Kawano’s use of the phrase “toka itte,” which is typically used when the speaker does not wish to make her remark sound serious, is also indicative of her attempt not to appear to be accusing Shiraishi of being insensitive. In the above exchange, both Shiraishi and Kawano deploy laughter to mitigate potential damage caused by their utterances.

In both Examples (1)’ and (2)’, the fact that Kawano comments on the kinds of questions asked by Shiraishi is significant. It indicates that Kawano is highly attentive to the institutional nature of the talk (i.e., that the kinds of questions asked by the interviewer are different from those posed in casual conversations, and that the interviewee is expected to cooperate with the interviewer). Kawano’s expressions of surprise about Shiraishi’s unexpected questions could have been displayed differently, but they were expressed with co-occurring, in-speech laughter.

In the present data, laughter displayed by the recipient of “dangerous” questions is closely related to the original speaker’s laughter. The role played by the speaker’s laughter becomes clear when we examine anomalous cases, namely, “intrusive” questions produced without laughter.

(Example 3) Marital status [16:35]
Shiraishi: Singuru de irasshara[ru n desu ka.
single be NOM COP Q
Are you single?
Kawano: [Soo desu. Soo desu. =
That’s right. That’s right.
Shiraishi: =Hai hai.
Okay, okay.

We can safely assume that Shiraishi’s question, asked of someone whom one does not know well, would be considered inappropriate by many people. As we have seen, questions like this are produced with laughter elsewhere in the present data. However, it is not the case here. This may make one think that this is simply an anomaly from which the usual technique is absent. However, a closer examination of the question reveals that Shiraishi uses two special techniques here as if she were trying to compensate for the absence of the laugh device. First, the first two moras in the word for “single” are marked high in pitch compared to Shiraishi’s surrounding speech. Second, Shiraishi uses the honorific polite expression “de irasshara” in reference to Kawano’s marital status. This is the only instance in the whole interaction in which Shiraishi uses the honorific polite form. The high pitch coupled with this pragmatic choice suggests that Shiraishi treats this question as something different from the other questions produced without laughter.

Despite the extra work done by Shiraishi, however, the question is not treated by Kawano in the same way as the “abrasive” questions produced with laughter. In other words, the above question does not invite Kawano’s laughter. Another example of the same kind is shown below.

(Example 4) Job-hunting [40:04]
Shiraishi: Sore wa kanoo soo na n desu ka?
that TOP possible seem NOM COP Q
Does that seem possible?
Kawano: N: (.2) soo desu nee. Betsu ni hukanoo na koto de wa nai to omoimasu kedo. *hmm let's-see not-particularly impossible thing COP-NEG QT think but* 
Hmm. Well, I think it is not particularly an impossible thing, but

The referent of "sore" in Shiraishi's utterance is Kawano's plan to find a teaching position at a Japanese university in the future. Shiraishi's candid question is produced without laughter, which is unusual given the potentially threatening content of the question. However, when she introduces the topic (i.e., Kawano's future career plan) two turns before her turn shown above, Shiraishi prefaces it by saying, "Shitsuree desu kedo [It is rude of me (to ask you this question), but (let me ask you)]." This is the only instance in the entire interaction in which Shiraishi comments on the "inquisitiveness" of her question. Shiraishi's display of her awareness of the nature of the subsequent question appears to compensate for the absence of laughter from the question. Again, when a delicate question is produced without accompanying laughter, special work is done by the speaker.

Although Shiraishi's question, produced without laughter, about whether Kawano's plan is feasible or not has been presented in the vicinity of the speaker's own remark acknowledging its "abrasive" content, Kawano replies to it without laughter. This instance and Example (3) show us the interactional significance of laughter occurring with potentially face-threatening questions. Out of nine "abrasive" questions in the present data, seven are produced with in-speech laughter. As if compensating for the lack of co-occurring laughter, special work is done to the remaining two questions. Nevertheless, the questions do not invite recipient laughter. The recipient of these questions, at least in the present data, does not simply respond with laughter to display her acceptance of the questions and willingness to collaboratively construct the discourse. Rather, when the recipient employs a mitigating laugh, she is actually reciprocally responding to the questioner's particular action (i.e., laughter).

4.1.3 The Recipient's Further Cooperation

Now I demonstrate that the interviewee does not only tolerantly accept the interviewer's "abrasive" questions but also actively legitimates such questions. An extended version of Example (2)' is shown below.

(Example 2)' Savings

Shiraishi: Ikura gurai tameteta n (.) de (.) su (. ) ka::: how-much about had-saved NOM COP Q
About how much money had you sa-re-d::: (before going to the U.S.)?

Kawano: [E

( . ) e, so:nnaka koto mo kiku n desu ka toka itte

huh

um such thing also ask NOM COP Q and-such say

What:::t. Um, do you ask such a thing too? I'm kidding

Shiraishi: E tabun kikitai tokoro da to omowa-
[( . ) omowanai desu?
mm perhaps want-to-hear point COP QT thin- think-NEG COP
Mm, perhaps that's what people want to know, don't you think?

Kawano: (Soo (. ) soo desu ne. N: jissai ni nanika
right right COP FP mm actually something
yaroo to omottara sore ga nai to going-to-do QT think-if that S exist-NEG if
Right. That's right. Mm. If you decide to actually do something,
and if you don't have it, then

Kawano first expresses her surprise explicitly, but her potentially accusative tone is mitigated by the laughter that stretches over the entire utterance. Then Shiraishi gives her reason for asking the question and Kawano starts to express her agreement even before Shiraishi is done with the self-justification. Not only that, Kawano volunteers to give further justification of Shiraishi's question.
Here is clear evidence that the participants are actively achieving affiliation. There are two other instances of this kind in my data.

To sum up the first finding regarding laughter in the present data, the interviewer’s questions are recurrently produced with in-speech laughter when she asks something potentially threatening to the recipient. A few exceptional cases in which laughter is absent can be accounted for by the presence of other kinds of special work done by the speaker. This kind of speaker laughter is immediately followed by recipient laughter, resulting in shared laughter. The recipient laughter is typically followed by a remark that justifies the interviewer’s “abrasive” question. Laughter plays a significant role in the construction and reinforcement of affiliation within this particular interaction.

4.2 Troubles-Teller’s Laughter Joined by Recipient

We now turn to the second recurrent phenomenon found in the data. The interviewee’s utterances containing delicate or embarrassing pieces of information about herself or her own past/future trouble are always produced with laughter and are immediately joined by her co-participant’s laughter. The placement of the laughter by the trouble-teller is either turn-final in-speech or immediately after the utterance in question. This is contradictory to Jefferson’s (1984) finding that a “troubles-teller produces an utterance and then laughs, and the troubles-recipient does not laugh, but produces a recognizably serious response” (p.346).

(Example 5) Low income [22:16]
Kawano: Minkan no nihongo gakkou ita toki mo isogashii katta n desu kedo: ma motomoto
private LK Japanese-lang school was time also was-busy NOM COP but uh to-begin-with
When I was at a private Japanese language school, I was busy too, but I mean, to begin with
Shiraishi: [Ee, ee
Uh-huh, uh-huh
Kawano: anmari moratte nakatta [kara tsukau
mono mo [nakatta n desu kedo
not-very received-NEG therefore use thing either existed-NEG NOM COP but
I was not paid much, so I had no money to spend...

Shiraishi:

[(laugh)]

Prior to this segment, Kawano has just revealed how much money she had saved before going to the U.S. The amount impresses Shiraishi, and Kawano explains that it was possible because she was too busy to spend her earnings. Kawano then goes on to talk about her rather poor economic situation in the past, starting to laugh in the middle of her utterance. This type of laughter appears to be doing an action identified by Norrick (1993), namely, presenting oneself as an individual with the ability to laugh at problems and overcome them. Jefferson (1984) interprets the troubles-teller’s laughter in the course of a “troubles-telling” as a display that one is in a position to take the trouble lightly by laughing while talking about one’s own trouble. Kawano’s laughter in the above segment appears to be in line with these accounts.

However, the way in which the speaker’s laughter is taken up by the recipient of the troubles-talk here is different from the recurrent pattern found by Jefferson (1984). According to Jefferson, a “properly aligned troubles-recipient does not treat the teller’s laughter as an occasion to participate in a laughing together” (p.367). Contrary to this claim, Shiraishi does laugh with Kawano. Indeed, two occurrences of Shiraishi’s back-channeling tokens (i.e., “Ee, ee” and “Ee”) are rather striking. They seem to violate a “typical” Japanese expectation for the listener to deny the validity of the speaker’s self-downgrading remarks. Therefore, the way Shiraishi aligns herself with Kawano (i.e., simply sending equivocal listener responses instead of expressing doubt about the undesirable piece of information provided by Kawano) when Kawano is telling her past trouble is different from a typical Japanese communicative practice and may be considered deviant from the cultural “norm.”

In the one-hour interaction, there are nine instances in which Kawano tells her “troubles.” Eight out of the nine end with Kawano’s laughter,
and all the instances of laughter are joined by Shiraishi. In sum, in the present data, the interviewee’s troubles are almost always presented with her own laughter, and the laughter is always joined by the recipient, resulting in shared laughter. The only instance of talk about the speaker’s trouble produced without laughter is also followed by the recipient’s laughter. The recipient appears to think that laughter is an expected response when the speaker says something undesirable about herself. The different patterns found in Jefferson’s study (1984) and the present study may simply be attributed to the fact that the former investigated laughter in English conversation, and the latter in Japanese, but the preliminary nature of the present study does not allow us to account for the difference.

One plausible explanation is that the two participants’ affinity enables the recipient to take the same stance as the troubles-teller. The way Shiraishi shifts between roles (i.e., that of an interviewer representing her organization versus that of a fellow feminist) clearly indicates that the interview is more than institutional discourse. Shiraishi utilizes the laugh device when asking “intrusive” questions she would not normally ask, and Shiraishi’s laughter appears to provide Kawano with the appropriate frame to understand the situation necessitated by the institutional goals. Kawano’s willingness to collaboratively accomplish Shiraishi’s goals is evident as shown in the examples. Given the participants’ alignment, it is not surprising that the interviewer joins in the troubles-teller’s laughter.

5. Conclusion

We display our understanding of a particular communicative event we are engaged in and relationship(s) between co-participants through a variety of practices in the unfolding talk. Laughter is one of those practices. It also reflexively shapes the interactional context. We have seen in the present data that laughter is indeed a systematic activity that can be utilized as an interactional resource and play a significant role in building social relationships.

Notes

1) All names are pseudonyms.
2) When a laugh occurs over a stretch of speaking, the relevant part is indicated by double underlines. For instance, “daigaku” indicates that the syllables “gaku” within the word “daigaku” have a laughing quality. The corresponding part in the English translation is marked by a single underline. On the other hand, if laughter occurs outside of an utterance, it is placed where it occurs, indicated as (laugh). For the other symbols, see Appendix A.

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References


Appendix A

Transcription Conventions (A modified version of the system developed by Jefferson. See Atkinson and Heritage, 1984.)

[overlap] Brackets: Onset and Offset of overlapping talk

= Equal sign: “Latching”: There is no pause between adjacent utterances.

: Colon(s): Preceding sound is extended or stretched.

(0,0) Timed pause

( ) Micropause of less than 0.2 seconds

? Rising intonation

- Hyphen: cut-off

( ) Empty parentheses: No hearing could be achieved.

Appendix B

Abbreviations Used in the Interlinear Gloss

S: subject marker

LK: linking nominal

COP: various forms of copula “be”

TOP: topic marker

Q: question marker

QT: quotative marker

NOM: nominalizer

FP: sentence final particle

NEG: negative

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