What’s so Funny? Laughing Together in Algonquin Conversation

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Introduction

This paper examines several Algonquin conversational fragments with an interest in discovering and describing some of the methods that people engaged in ongoing conversation use to initiate, sustain and terminate a series of topically-related utterances in the context of humorous talk. In her discourse analysis of a Severn Ojibwa text, Valentine (1986:12) identifies such paralinguistic phenomena as laughter and coughs as performative features found within the text and suggests that laughter, in at least one instance, “... comes at a point in the narrative where the... audience knows a conflict will arise.” Rhodes (1988), in his analysis of positive politeness strategies, includes the feature of laughter in presenting evidence that Ojibwa speakers form a single, cooperative in-group. This paper explores not only some ways in which laughter and humour are managed in Algonquin conversation, but also some of the culturally defined humorous themes at work in Algonquin interaction.

The data analyzed here were collected in the Algonquin community of Winneway, Québec, a community of approximately 350 people and one of nine Algonquin communities in the province. The conversational tape from which the data are drawn was recorded by the manager of the local radio station for use on the community radio. The data are public, consisting of tape-recorded conversations, transcriptions of those conversations with word-for-word glosses and free translations. The participants included the five Algonquin language teachers from Amo Ososwan School in Winneway, all female and ranging in age from the early 30s to around 65.

1I wish to thank Lisa Valentine and Lisa McMartin for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also wish to thank the Director of Education at Amo Ososwan School in Winneway, Québec, Gordon Polson, and the Community Education Council for supporting this research.
The analysis of the tape and transcripts began with some relatively casual observations in relation to the general analytical framework known as “Conversational Analysis”. Conversational Analysis (henceforth CA) is concerned with the discovery and description of detailed orderliness in conversational interaction, showing how participants orient to that orderliness and describing the cultural knowledge and interactional techniques for using that knowledge. CA asks: How do people do things in and through talk? How do they accomplish activities and how do they make those accomplishments known to others? In CA, members (people who share a common language and common culture) are seen as being concerned with maintaining sequential order. The object of inquiry is not so much language structure as interactional ability in verbal production.

Before looking at the conversational transcripts, I want to comment on some of the transcription devices used in this paper. When intervals occur in a conversational sequence, they are timed in terms of half-seconds and inserted within parentheses either within an utterance or between utterances. When the current speaker laughs or laughter occurs overlapping or following an utterance, the word “laughter” is placed within parentheses with the time of the laughter immediately following. When conversational participants laugh at the same time, the word “laughter” is placed in parentheses with the time of the laughter and unassociated with any single speaker. When the current speaker laughs during the uttering of a word or phrase, I marked the beginning and ending of the laughter by putting the word or phrase into italics. Also, when laughter is not associated with with any single speaker, I mean to imply that all of the conversational participants were laughing simultaneously.

**Sequential Organization of a Series of Utterances**

Gail Jefferson (1984) has demonstrated how, in English, the onset of laughter by the current speaker in natural conversation can initiate a “laughing-together” with all of the conversational participants becoming involved. Here the term “laughing-together” indicates that all of the participants in the conversation laugh simultaneously. In our Algonquin materials I found a phenomenon similar to the structure found by Jefferson in English-speaking conversation. However, the structures in the Algonquin materials can have different interactional consequences as the laughing-together evolves into a series of utterances which refer back to the original utterance which initiated the laughing-together. In this paper I hope to show how a laughing-together plays an important part in Algonquin conversational interaction and helps to elucidate some of the culturally defined humorous themes in Algonquin culture.
In the following examples the activity of laughing-together seems to be achieved via recipient(s) laughing in response to a prior speaker’s laughter embedded in prior speaker’s utterance or upon completion of that utterance. When producing an utterance designed to initiate a laughing-together, speakers are obliged to position their utterances so as to show their relevance to the ongoing talk. Note how a laughing-together is initiated by means of current speaker laughter in Example 1:M1–M3 and Example 2:L2–L4:

Example 1: *(Win. 86.89–108)*

H1: Aagim dac niin nikitci minwenimaa e pimoseyaan (1.0) kidji pabaa maagimeyaan.

‘Me, I really like snowshoes when walking around (1.0) on the snow.’

L1: Mii keniin (2.0) nikitci minwendaan noopiming e pimoseyaan.

‘Me too (2.0) I really like walking in the bush.’

H2: Mm-hmm

C1: Agwaak kiga pagicin. (2.0)

‘Watch out, you’ll fall.’ (2.0)

L2: Nookaagonagaag sa wiinana ke iji pagiciniyaan (1.0) mikwamii dac wiin kitci mackaawizi!

‘I’ll fall for sure on the soft snow (1.0) the ice is really hard!’

(Laughter 3.0)

H3: Mikwamii wiin kitci mackaawizi.

‘The ice is really hard.’

L3: Mm-hmm (2.0)

M1: Niminwendaan keniin e cockwaadawayaan aadidok sa keyaabadj ke odji kackitowaaban (1.0) (laughs .5) Noongom mayaa nidaa kitci pagicin!

‘Me too I like to skate, I don’t know if I could still do it (1.0) (laughs .5) Now I would really fall down!

(Laughter 2.0)

M2: Nidaa kitci kijiiyaabonan noongom mayaa!

‘I would really glide fast right now!’

(Laughter 2.0)
M3: Ihimaa *nidaa kotaadabonaaban*!

There *I would be gliding out of control!*

(Laughter 7.0)

L4: Kiin dac Susan, kiin kicockwaadawenaaban ako weckadj?

‘You then Susan, did you used to skate a long time ago?’

[conversation continues]

*Example 2: (Win. 86.192-201)*

H1: Ehina dac nodaawaabanin ako Amos e ikidodj (1.0) “manaadizi”. Pakaan ikido na?

‘Uhhh I heard them before at Amos saying (1.0) “manaadizi”. He says it different, y’know?’

C1: Ehe (1.0)

‘Yeah’ (1.0)

H2: Pakaan kewiin ikido (2.0) “manaadizi” e ikidodj.

‘He says it different (2.0) “manaadizi” she says.’

C2: “Manaadizi” ikidonaniwan wedi, ka na?

‘ “Manaadizi” they say there, don’t they?’

H3: Ka(win), ninodaawaabanin ako, kitci kokom ako nodaawaaban e ikidodj pakaan, ikidoban (2.0) “manaadizi” e ikidodj.

‘No, I heard them before, I heard an old woman saying it different, she said (2.0) “manaadizi” she says.’

L1: Andi dac e ikodomagag?

‘So what does it mean?’

H4: “Wawiiyaazinaagozi” ikido.

‘ “Wawiiyaazinaagozi” she says.’

(Laughter 2.0)

L2: *Ohhh* kawin kada minosesinoban *wa iji aabadjiticigaadeg!*

‘Ohhh it wouldn’t work *to use that!*’

(Laughter 3.0)

L3: *Kidaa kiijimaaa!*
‘You could make him mad!’

(Laughter 3.0)

M1: Mii ke iji nickadiziwaapan!

‘He would be really angry!’

(Laughter 3.0)

L4: Ohhhh kotaadjji maane!

‘Ohhhh lots of them!’

(Laughter 6.0)

In these examples co-conversationalists regularly start to speak after the onset of laughter and, at times, before it subsides. In Example 1, M in M1–M3 seems to be building a series of utterances generally related to the topic of skating and, more specifically, to her self-perceived incapacity to successfully participate in the activity. This is seen at the end of her first utterance:

M1: Noongom mayaa nidaa kitci pagicin.

‘Right now I would really fall down’

followed by:

M2: Nidaa kitci kijiiyaabonan noongom mayaa.

‘I would sure glide fast on the snow now’

and concluding with:

M3: Ihimaa nidaa kotaadabonaaban.

‘There I would be out of control (going fast)’

When I first listened to this conversation it seemed that M was building an utterance series with recipient laughter binding the sequence together as a recognizable activity. First, note that the series of utterances in Example 1:M1–M3 has a kind of three-part structure based on laughter timing and starting with: (1) an initiating utterance, followed by (2) an utterance which sustains the utterance series, and concluding with (3) an utterance which terminates the series. After M gains the floor following L3 and the two-second pause with a topically relevant statement in M1, she laughs at two different places in the midst of her utterance. At this point in her turn at speaking her laughter does not generate a laughing-together.
Current speaker laughter, such as we find in M1, can accomplish a number of purposes, the two of immediate importance to us being: (1) it can inform recipient(s) that something funny is coming up in the current or next utterance, and/or (2) it can initiate a laughing-together. Current speaker laughter in the middle of utterance M1 appears to be accomplishing the former, while speaker laughter at the end of M1 does the job of generating a laughing-together.

The three-part structure of the utterance series and the laughing-together can be seen to be a concerted achievement between current speaker and recipients. There are, however, times when co-conversationalists can be seen to be recognizably declining the invitation to laugh-together (cf. Spielmann and Valentine 1988). Suffice it to say here that the series of utterances in M1–M3 demonstrates one form of interactional cohesion: a topically relevant humorous sequence with laughing-together as one salient feature and a distinct three-part structure being the second. Now, if we intend to make claims for organizational structures in Algonquin conversation, we ought to look at other conversational data to see if the organization located and described can be found in other conversational contexts.

Laughter Timing as an Interactional Resource

With the above analysis in mind, I want to compare the three-part utterance series in Example 1 with a similar structure in Example 2. First, note that the laughter timing in Example 1:M1–M3 and Example 2:L2–L4 indicates that the utterance sequences are seen by the participants as complete. In Example 1, after current speaker M initiates a laughing-together in M1, the first laughing-together lasts for two seconds. The second utterance in the series is also followed by a laughing-together of two seconds and then the final utterance in the series is followed by a laughing-together of seven seconds. In Example 2, L’s first utterance in her series of utterances (L2) is followed by a laughing-together of three seconds, her second utterance in the series (L3) is followed by a laughing-together of three seconds (as is M’s paraphrase of L3 in utterance M1), and L’s final utterance in the series (L4) is followed by a laughing-together of six seconds. In both Example 1 and Example 2, we can see a recognizable three-part series of utterances and a structured laughing-together, with a recognizable structure to the timing of the laughing-together in both examples. The longest laugh time comes after the third (and final) utterance in each utterance series and marks the end of the series and of the laughing-together.

Further, the talk in these examples can be seen to be interactionally cohesive and the three-part series of utterance structure (with laughing-together as one salient feature) may be specifically deployed to accom-
plish topic closure. Lisa Valentine (1988:11–13), in her analysis of a Severn Ojibwa narrative, shows that there is a kind of structure to current speaker laughter within the structure of the narrative itself. She claims that narrator laughter in Severn Ojibwa can be used to highlight informational aspects of the story that are important to the dramatic effect the narrator is trying to achieve. Furthermore, and more closely related to our interests, she shows how narrator laughter can be an accomplice to episode closure and segments the telling and recap portions of the narration.

We will now look at Examples 3 and 4 and compare the laughter positioning and timing with Examples 1 and 2:

**Example 3: (Win. 86.393–399)**

L1: Susan, kiwi kwakwedjimin uhhh ka (1.0) andi ka ijjseg kiin (1.0) kikikinoamaage pakesagaakaag kegon (1.0) paapicise konigodj (1.0) ki madjise (laughs .5)

'Susan, I want to ask you uhhh (1.0) what happened you (1.0) in your school classroom, something (1.0) funny or (1.0) [something] that went wrong (laughs .5)

S1: Paapicise?

'[Something] funny?'

L2: Ka kijebaawagag.

'In the morning.'

S2: Nigi waabadahag abinodjiijesag na (1.0) “flash cards” (2.0) Pepejig dac (1.0) "Grade One" dac wiin ogi kiikendasinawaa na paanima dac niwaabadahag na niin sa godj nidijitaa. Pejig dac ahaa abinodjiijesis niwaabamaa sa niin, Freda ogwizisan, ogwizisesan, Buck (1.0) “Wegonan oho” nidinaa, “Andi ejitaadj abinodjiic?” (1.0) “Niimi” ikido, “Ehe, aanicinaabe niimi” (laughs .5) “Andi ejitaadj, aackwe saa waabadehecin”. _Kitci niimi_!

'I showed the small kids, y’know (1.0) flash cards (2.0) Each one of them in Grade 1 then they didn’t know, y’know? So I had to show them, y’know, exactly what I’m doing. So one of those small kids I see him, Freda’s son, her small son, Buck (1.0) “What’s this?” I say to him, “What’s the child doing?” (1.0) “He’s dancing”, he says, “Yeah, the Indian is dancing (laughs .5) What’s he doing? Show me”. _He really dances_!' (Laughter 4.0)

S3: Wawiiyaazinagozi.

'He looks cute.'

L3: Mm-hmm
S4: Kitci paapiwag abinodjiisag (laughs 2.0)

‘The small kids are really laughing’ (laughs 2.0)

(7.0)

[Change of Topic]

Example 4: (Win. 86.403-407)

M2: Aaja dac ahawedi pejig (1.0) “piidigen” odinan (laughs .5) Roger okitci paapi-jitaawan e ikidondjin e piidigendjin!

‘Now then that one there [child] (1.0) “Come in” he tells him (laughs .5) Roger really laughed when he said for him to come in!

(Laughter 3.0)

M3: Buckley maa inaaganiwii ahawe (2.0) mii “kwe” e ikidowaadj abinodjiijesag piidigenaaniwanig (1.0) “Piidigen” ogaa inaan aawagon.

‘Buckley he is told that one (2.0) then “kwe” when the small kids say when someone is coming in (1.0) “Come in” they will tell him.

(Laughter 2.0)

M4: Niintam ako ikidobanig e ako piidigendjin “kwe, kwe” odinaawaabaniin, aaja maamaj megaa kaawin ki kikinoamaago-ziisiwag kanabadj dac ki wani-ikewag (1.0) meckodj dac noongom ikidowag ako “Piidigen” mii ke ikidowaadj (laughs 3.0)

(3.0)

[Change of Topic]

First, note that in Example 3:S2-S4 and Example 4:M1-M4 we find instances in the transcripts where the story recipients do not laugh but respond with noticeable silence (represented as pauses in the transcripts) to someone recounting a humorous anecdote. Notice in particular S4 in Example 3 as the speaker, S, ends the telling sequence with a kind of recap utterance:

S4: Kitci paapiwag abinodjiisag (laughs 2.0)

‘The small kids are really laughing’ (laughs 2.0)

In Example 4, utterance M4, we find a similar structure where M has finished her anecdote with a kind of explanatory statement:

M4: Meckodj dac noongom ikidowag ako “Piidigen” mii ke ikidowaadj (laughs 3.0)
'It's changed then, now they'll usually say “Come in” that's what they'll say' (laughs 3.0)

In neither instance does current speaker laughter generate a laughing-together but is followed instead by recipient silence. This feature appears to run counter to the procedure in Algonquin interaction whereby recipients display affiliation with a prior speaker, as we saw in Example 1:M1–M3 and Example 2:L2–L4.

Certainly co-conversationalists can decline in joining in with current speaker laughter, as we see happening following S4 in Example 3 and M4 in Example 4. It seems reasonable to suggest that current speaker laughter can do the work of preparing co-conversationalists to look for something humorous in the next utterance. In Example 4, however, it appears that the laughing-together following utterances M2 and M3 is taken to be sufficient by her co-conversationalists. How so?

It seems that, in Example 4, M4 offers no new information or humorous content for her recipients and is thus sequentially deleted. This claim can be substantiated by noting that utterance M4 receives no recipient responses or appreciation tokens and by noticing how, in Examples 1 and 2, the three-part same-speaker utterance series are comprised of three utterances containing new information and/or humorous content.

I claimed earlier that same-speaker laughter and recipient laughing-together can be a valuable resource in conversational interaction. A laughing-together appears to be the product of a methodical and concerted activity on the part of speakers and hearers in Algonquin interaction. In these materials, it seems to be achieved through recipient laughter in reference to a prior speaker's laughter, as we noted in Example 1:M1–M3 and Example 2:L2–L4.

Two orderings of laughter in the environment of requested stories can now be identified. In the first ordering, co-participants can be recognizably declining to join in laughing-together as in Examples 3 and 4. In an analysis of request deliveries and response types in Algonquin, Bertha Chief and I (Spielmann and Chief 1986) noted instances in Algonquin conversational interaction where the response to a request for a favour provided for the possibility of a conversational trouble, where responses to questions fall outside of the category of preferred responses. Thus silence may be a preferred response among Algonquins in a variety of conversational contexts. Indeed, this appears to be quite wide-spread among Native Americans (cf. Basso 1970).

For a variety of first actions, such as attempting to initiate a laughing-together, it seems that dispreferred second actions, such as declining to laugh or delaying a response, are routinely avoided, whereas preferred actions, such as responding to an invitation to do laughing-together, are usu-
ally performed with little or no delay. In conversational interaction people are expected to continuously display that they are talking to each other about the same things.

In my own admittedly non-native perception of Algonquin culture, it would seem that declining to participate with current speaker laughter could constitute conversational trouble for the speaker. In Example 3:S2–S4 and Example 4:M1–M4, however, I suspect that declining to laugh in tandem with current speaker is not a dispreferred response in Algonquin interaction. This claim is based on (1) the positioning of the laughing-together earlier on in the sequences, and (2) the position of current speaker laughter in the structure of the story sequence.

Note, first, that the positioning of the laughing-together occurs at sequence end as opposed to the completion of the telling sequence itself which is extended by an evaluation of the anecdote by the teller herself. Looking again at Example 3 we find that S does initiate a laughing-together following the punchline of the anecdote in S2, Kitci niimi ‘He’s really dancing’. Then in S3, S comments on how Wawiiyaazinaagozi ‘He looks cute’, which is responded to only by L’s Mm-hmm. In S4, S offers a further evaluative comment on the story:

S4: Kitci paapiwag abinodiisesag

‘The little kids are really laughing’

Similarly, in Example 4:M1–M4, M initiates a laughing-together following the end of the story in M2, then in her story elaboration and evaluation in M3–M4 she is the only one who laughs following each utterance. The point here is that it appears that, while a laughing-together is a preferred response at story end, it is not necessarily a preferred feature at sequence completion. So then an environment exists in which declining to laugh following the laughter of current speaker may not be considered a dispreferred response.

Such an environment can be clearly seen in Examples 3 and 4 where, following each anecdote, recipients indicate that they have attended to what has been recounted and that they have understood the punchline. Nevertheless, both speakers in Examples 3 and 4 produce utterances following their anecdotes which elaborate or comment on them. The anecdotes do not necessarily need elaboration, however. In Example 3:S3–S4, S’s two utterances following her anecdote are not produced to explain the punchline of the story, Kitci niimi! ‘He’s really dancing!’ in S2, but to show how teller recognition for one rule that tellers ought to pay attention to in the culture: that stories be accountable in relation to the ongoing talk and that topical relevance is one possible account. Thus S does not merely rely on the funniness of her story in S2 to account for its production, she
demonstrates that her story is tied sequentially to a request for a story in L1 by producing utterances (S3 and S4) which lead back to the original request to tell about something funny that happened that morning in L's classroom. Note the similar structure in Example 4:M3–M4.

The above considerations about the sequential structure of an utterance series bring us back to the placement considerations for topic closure. One feature of topic closing in our Algonquin materials is the relationship between what Schegloff and Sacks (1974) call "pre-closings" and laughter/pause positioning. We have already noted one pre-closing device in an utterance series; the three-part structure of laughter timing where the laughing-together begins with a short burst (in our materials between two to three seconds), is sustained with a similar length laughing-together and ends with a much longer laughing-together (in our materials at least twice as long as the two previous instances of laughing-together within the utterance series sequence). Another feature of the pre-closing operation is that the laughing-together at sequence end indicates to the conversational participants that the floor is open to any speaker to introduce a new topic without violating topical cohesion in the ongoing talk.

Conclusion

In this paper I have been looking at a number of examples of laughter positioning in Algonquin conversation in order to show how laughter can be used as an interactional resource in ongoing conversation. I have tried to show how laughter can be used to accomplish a variety of interactional activities in Algonquin interaction, such as topic closure, expressing recipient appreciation, initiating a laughing-together and, in collaboration with other structural features of Algonquin conversational interaction, to initiate, sustain and terminate an utterance series. In any culture, laughter can help to initiate and sustain communication and friendship. In Algonquin interaction we have it available to see that there are culturally-specific techniques for the use of laughter in conversation. Humorous themes and laughter positioning in Algonquin tend to throw light on what are considered to be important cultural values; group solidarity, interpersonal harmony, patience and tolerance. Finally, I described one conversational environment in which declining to laugh following the laughter of current speaker could also be used as an interactional resource for facilitating topic closure and topic change.
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