A Case of *Seinfeld* Laughing: A Critical Feature of the Text and Audience Relationship That Makes Laughter an Available Option

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Abstract

It is hard, in fact almost impossible to get through the day without ‘being an audience’. It is a practical, common sense and an everyday experience. The very fact that it is done so well, reproduced without effort is extraordinary. Yet, there have been to date no studies on this common sense activity. How do we do ‘being an audience’? This study draws on the approaches of Harvey Sacks (1992) who looked at the ordinary as something extraordinary. The act of doing ordinary things within the formal structures of living as an achievement. You have to know what is ordinary before you can do ordinariness. This study is about the very ‘ordinary’ act of being an audience. Exposing the formal structures involved that make the work of audiences a practicality. This will be done by the marriage of two theoretical perspectives, which focus on locally produced order. This locally produced order found in Erving Goffman (1981) and Harvey Sacks (1992) will isolate the context of the audience relationship with the textual environment. This context is made available for study because of audience laughter. As the laughter in *Seinfeld* is recorded from a live audience the interaction is one that exists in real time. Laughter is an opportunity to study the relationship between the audience and the text, the critical features of this relationship - the context.

This paper will explore the positions and alignment of the text and audience relationship of *Seinfeld* by examining the interaction between the text and the audience as if it were a conversation, using audience laughter as a turn of speech. Under investigation are the conditions, which set up laughter as an available option for an audience. Importantly laughter is seen as an indexical expression (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1986: 160-161). It is part of a social occasion as it is an organised feature of conversation that can be invited or declined (Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff, 1987 and Jefferson 1974, 1979 and 1992). As a result it is not unreasonable to suggest that laughter from a particular audience must have some sort of order to it.
The context for this analysis is twofold, however only one of the features will be examined in this paper, of the position the audience occupies in relation to the textual environment. This is the context that enables laughter to happen, but does not necessarily make laughter occur. The participation framework (Goffman, 1981) will illustrate how an alignment between the text and the audience is instituted by the occasion. It is the link Sacks (1992) and Goffman (1981) share in locally produced order that allows a bond between two sometimes contradictory perspectives (Rawls, 1989: 174). Laughter is made available by the context. The alignment of the audience is one critical feature of this context. By examining the live laughter from the audience of Seinfeld the context of this laughter and the subsequent position the audience occupies in relation to the text can be investigated.

The simplicity of ‘speakers and hearers’ as a problem for analysis

If Goffman’s (1981) principles of interaction are taken into account there are various tools that can be implemented to illustrate the way in which an audience is more likely to interact with the text. Obviously not all audiences are suitable for this type of analysis, however comedy allows a study into this interaction through audience laughter. For Goffman the essential ingredient for conversation begins with a speaker and hearer (Goffman, 1981: 129). In person to person conversation this is easily defined even though Goffman (see 1981:129) has initial problems with the simplicity of the two-person arrangement. This problem of simplicity exists when studying the audience. It is not a simple arrangement, where communication happens on a face to face level. Conversation analysis (Psathas 1995 and Sacks 1992) as a ‘lone tool’ is not adequate for an inquiry into the audience. Goffman gives an explanation into why face to face analysis is too simplistic, which paralleled the problems faced in this inquiry.

The first problem encountered is how to apply theory that exists for unscripted, spontaneous conversation to something that is formed and practiced so well that mistakes do not exist (or they are purposely removed). The text itself does not happen in any sort of ‘real’ time, it is an act, a play, with no form of human error inherent in it. In this instance the speaker (text) is dependable, in that it will always say exactly what it is designed to say without any deviation from its norm.

A speaker within a person to person interaction is not static in the role of speaker - it would be normal to assume that a speaker would switch between producing an utterance and receiving one. As such the speaker can

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1 The data came from a Foxtel TV1 'marathon run' of Seinfeld during June 2002. Only scenes with the characters George Costanza, Estel Costanza and Frank Costanza were analysed. Emphasis must also be added to Seinfeld taping with a live audience. The taping is then evidence of interaction in real time.
also be the hearer within a conversation, something that is not easily defined with the text ‘acting’ as speaker.

The audience then is the hearer, and under this operation their reception is of the text. Such an action from the audience is bounded. It is difficult to place the audience within the category of an officially ratified participant because they are only allowed one action, laughter (see Atkinson, 1992 for similar issues). The officially ratified hearer has the opportunity to change their alignment, so that they may become the speakers, interrupt the speaker or talk over an utterance (Goffman, 1981:131). The audience does not have this option and as such does not fall into the category of an official ratified participant of a conversation. In fact the only officially ratified participant of the conversation is the text. The audience cannot transform the text but can interact with it although in a small way. It is difficult then to assume that the text and audience exist as speaker and hearer respectively - although there is some loose indication that something is happening between the two. Laughter allows acknowledgment of the existence of an audience but locating them as a hearer of the text does not shed light on the capacity they act under. This specifically indicates a place for further inquiry, namely pushing aside the dichotomy of speakers and hearers as Goffman suggests. It opens up the possibility of existing outside of this arrangement. What follows is the other positions the audience are likely to act through in order for ‘laughing’ from the audience to heard as a ‘next action’. A focus on positions is what Goffman referred to as footing. For Goffman (see 1981:124-159) footing refers to the alignment of participants to the social occasion. Due to the type and the limit of interaction on the part of the audience footing provides a depth of analysis into laughter itself. It is not the case that all laughter is the same (see Jefferson 1979 and 1984, Glenn, 1995 and Sacks, 1992). Footing allows the small and minute details of laughter and the consequences a particular type of laughter has on the alignment of participants within an occasion.

Further because the audience does not exist as a ‘hearer’ through Goffman’s definition - the capacity to which they can be studied is still not available. The bounded nature of speakers and hearers does not provide an account of the footing or position the audience acts so that laughter becomes a ‘next possible action’. The audience as a ratified participant does not explain this phenomenon either, as they can not alter the textual environment even though their laughter can be heard as a turn of speech. However, through the social occasion, various forms footing can take are unlocked. The exact footing/position of the audience is needed to determine why the order or sequence of laughter occurs the way it does.

Identifying the social occasion in *Seinfeld*.

If it can be identified that the text and the audience interact through a social occasion, a depth of analysis can be offered to shed light on the role the audience plays through laughter, and in turn confirm the texts place as the only ratified participant within the interaction. For Goffman (see 1981: 130) intrinsic to the social occasion is the gathering of more than
two participants. In this gathering there is an opening and a closing, both respectively include greetings and farewells. Consider the following opening:

(Data 1, Transcript 1)

George (G), Audience (A).

1. G: Who would order a lobster here? (.2) >I mean do
2. they bring a lobster in
3. everyday hoping today’s the [da:y<
4. A:                                       [Hahahahaha

The gathering of the audience and the text is the most unproblematic, in that it can be assumed the gathering is taking place. From data 1 it does not seem that the text must gain attention of the audience (lines 1-3), the normal requirements of greetings and farewells are dispensed with. It is the presence of laughter that provides the evidence of a ‘gathering’ and that the audience supports the text as a ratified participant. There is no other ratified participant to provide the text with the status that it is being listened to. The audience does give an indication that they understand what is being said, but they can never obtain the role of speaker. It is also impossible to find an instance where the audiences’ laughter may become the utterance that is ‘heard’ by the text. This would be the only indication that the audience existed as a ratified participant. It must be assumed that the laughter is never heard or perhaps acknowledged, only put up with by the text as a phenomenon of the environment (this will be discussed later in terms of a bystander). Notions then of gatherings, greetings and farewells can be dispensed with as tools for application of a social occasion. The audience, however, does illustrate a sustained involvement with the text:

Data 2 (transcript 2)

Audience (A), Estel (E), Frank (F).

1 A: ((George and Frank enter doorway)) hahahahahaha (2)
2 E: Where have you bi:n (.2) You were spostto:o fix the stove (.1)
3      I’ve bin waiting for hou:wers
4 F: I fell on some fusilli
5 A: HAHAHAHAHA
6 E: fusilli?
7A: ((mutter noise not laughter - more like movement))
8 F: Yo:u know (.1) the cork screw pasta (.1) > it was a fusilli Jerry< =
9 A: = hahahahaha
10 F: [it got stuck in me
11 A: [hahaha((very faint ))
For something to be defined as a social occasion it must have some sort of sustained involvement. Data 2 provides a continuous turn sequence where importantly there are no long pauses or lengths of conversation where utterances are spoken over the top of one another. Noticeable are the turn sequences, particularly though lines 8 to 11. Line 8 is the punch line, the setup of the joke. The audience laughs immediately after line 4 is completed. Before the next line is delivered, the audience ceases to laugh and when they start to laugh at line 10 their laughter (line11) although it coincides with the utterance is noticeably softer than before. The inference here is the audience will not make the punch line inaudible or unable to be supplied. The text as a ratified participant has the balance of power and the audience follows this rule. The involvement is sustained because the audience adjusts their behaviour in favour of the text, instituting a relationship where the text has the balance of power. They are capable of loud laughter (line 5) when the occasion calls for it, yet they also maintain the ability to negotiate their laughter around the text so that it does not intrude (line 11).

The audience is therefore involved in a social occasion rather than existing as a hearer of the text. It is through their sustained involvement in turn taking that this can be established. Clearly the audience is not a ratified participant but a participant none the less. Closer examination of the social occasion will offer variable forms of participation, moving away from the rigid dichotomy of speakers and hearers.

The Audience as Bystander in Seinfeld

The social occasion introduces more depth to study. Far from merely holding the person to person encounter as a two party relationship - the occasion makes possible various forms of relationships. Particularly this helps when studying the audience. Already, the text and the audience have fallen outside of the category of speaking and hearing. The text is not able to share its role with the audience, and neither is the audience capable of transferring its role with the text. Yet it is still possible to find a relationship between the two, as they are able to sustain a coherent involvement with one another - without interrupting the meaning of the text. Goffman proposed that within the occasion and talk there are many more participants beyond speakers and hearers. So far, speakers and hearers have been labelled as ratified participants. However ratified participants more often than not share the field; “Much of the talk takes place in the visual and aural range of persons who are not ratified participants and whose access to the encounter, however minimal is itself perceivable by the official participants” (Goffman, 1981: 132). These people who stand outside the boundary are referred to as bystanders. Normally the bystander will not let their presence or their knowledge of proceedings be known to the ratified participants. Comedy does not follow these particular conventions and the act of laughing shatters the facade that there is no one listening in to the proceedings. However, the nature of institutional talk allows for a negotiation of these types of constraints (Drew and Heritage in Silverman, 2001: 174). Goffman seems to allow for this type of ne-
gotiation in advance pre-empting the constraints between bystanders and ratified participants. It is the text that defines the audience to an extent in its dominance of the encounter. It exists as the only ratified participant and as such dominates how the interaction is likely to proceed.

This forms a subordinated conversation where the laughter is strictly manned, timed and pitched to limit the interference laughter may have on the text (Goffman 1981:133). In effect this type of subordinated conversation is strictly schooled as there is no point where the action could stop and pull an audience aside to tell them they should have laughed louder, softer or not at all. Subordinated conversation allows the audience to act as bystander while simultaneously interacting with the text. Goffman (1981: 134) refers to this specific form of interaction as crossplay. Crossplay indicates a cross communication across the border of the dominant encounter between ratified participants and bystanders.

It is essential that bystanders are able to not only understand the language they are hearing but determine the same categories that the ratified participants are using (Goffman, 1981: 133). They cannot be a bystander if they do not follow the conversation at hand.

Data 3 (transcript 7)

George (G), Estel (E), Audience (A) and Frank (F).

1 G: Thank Go:d that’s ova
2 E: The mother seems to hit the fau:s pretty hard|>I don like that<
3 A: [hahahahahahaha
4 F: and who doesn’t serve cake [after a meal
5 A: ]hahahahaha
6 F:(.2) what kind of people are they (.2) would it kill them to put out a pound
7. cake (.1) something
8 A: Hahahahaha|hahah
9 G: [so they didn’t give you a piece of cake (.1) big deal=
10 E: =it is a big deal your suppo:sed to serve cake after a meal (.1) I’m so:rry
11 its impolite
12 A: Haha|hah
13 F: [Its not impo:lite (.1) >its stupid that’s what |it is

Data 3 illustrates a category that is not explicit, but slang. Here “faus” (line 2) refers to alcohol. The audience immediately responds indicating they have understood the category even before the line is finished. It also indicates a social competence on part of the audience (Sacks, 1992: 474). A quick response by the audience to this type of slang indicates an education in the social world. This would also explain why the audience laughed during the utterance and not after. The aim of social competence is to illustrate quickly that there is a level of understanding. This reaffirms that the audience is more likely to fit into the role of bystander than merely as
a ‘hearer’. Further, the text re-affirms their role by continuing the dialogue at the same pace (Data 3, lines 4-13).

Summary

The social occasion provides one critical feature of the text and audience relationship. The context of audience alignment to the text has been established, ‘setting the scene’ for further sequential analysis. Laughter from the audience is a turn of speech but under certain conditions. Firstly it is an alignment between a ratified participant (text) and a bystander (audience). This alignment is a ‘cross play’ - interaction across a dominant encounter between a ratified participant and a bystander. This determines an important design feature of participation. Any established interaction between these two participants must always occur because the ratified participant, in this case the text, has invited it. An audience on its own can not incite interaction, unless it has been invited by the text. Comedy perhaps draws upon the most sophisticated audiences. Sophisticated in the sense that laughter can only be done when it has been invited by the text. The audience must then understand their cue to laughter (and also silence).

Importantly now that the position of the audience has been sustained the investigation can continue towards uncovering the ways audiences are invited to laugh. This is the second critical feature of the context for this inquiry (and unfortunately not included in this paper). This context is examined through the nature of sequential talk between the text and the audience. Analysis then moves to how laughter is invited by turn sequence, and questions how something becomes laughable within this sequential context.

References


Notes on the Author

Eryn Grant is a research assistant for The Centre of Social Change Research and The School of Design and Built Environment at Queensland University of Technology. She is also completing her doctorate, which is investigating how the home is implicated in technology usage.
Appendix 1

Simplified transcription symbols

(adapted from Silverman, 2001 and Kotthoff, 2000)

(-) indicates a short pause
(0.5) indicate elapsed time without utterance
(? What?) uncertain transcription
(??) incomprehensible utterance
...[.. indicated overlap or interruption.

= attached utterance, no interruption
HAHAHA loud laughter
hahahah soft laughter
(.hhhh) audible exhalation
(hhhh) audible inhalation
WORD capitals except at beginning of lines indicates especially loud sounds

(( )) contains authors description
. indicates stop in tone
<< talk that is noticeably faster than surrounding talk
? rising intonation