

welcome, given that much of the basic methodology and data for the field of historical linguistics have traditionally come from Indo-European languages.

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References

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Phillip Glenn: *Laughter in Interaction*. *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xii + 190 pp. ISBN 0-521-77206-0.

This short book is an excellent introduction to laughter in interaction, more precisely to the multiparty organization of laughter's deployment in spoken English conversation. Laughter is on the one hand nonlinguistic, lacking phonological structure, symbolic meaning, and syntax in the normal sense of these terms. Yet, as Glenn has convinced me, laughter deserves serious attention from scholars of language and its structure. One reason is its manifestation in the very organs that produce speech. It is difficult, often impossible, to speak and laugh simultaneously, and this alone means that laughter is likely to have some structural relation to speech.¹ Another reason is that laughter almost exclusively occurs in social interaction, a domain in which language figures centrally, and for which, it may be argued, language is designed.

Three major propositions made in the book are (1) that laughter is a social phenomenon, (2) that laughter's deployment in interaction is finely organized, and (3) that laughter is a phenomenon both worthy of and amenable to scientific study by linguists and other scholars of language. Laughter has been regarded by some as a mere symptom of an internal state, but like facial expression it is very much a communicative phenomenon. In Chapter 1, Glenn surveys literature in fields such as ethology and psychology, reviewing the finding that laughter is far more likely to occur in the company of others. It is not an automatic or uncontrolled response to a given stimulus. Nor is laughter necessarily associated with "humor"

or other intellectual stimulus, as revealed, for example, by nervous laughter and laughter as a response to tickling. Glenn's repeated contention is that laughter in conversation is "organized, systematic, and finely coordinated with features of surrounding talk" (p. 61). At times, however, Glenn's fixation on the organized and social nature of laughter in interaction creates an imbalance. Perhaps not by intention, Glenn seems to be inferring that inner states are irrelevant to laughter's interactional deployment. But while laughter is indeed both organized and social, it is also often associated with an inner state of felt emotional response. Its physical realization can index a genuine lack of control over breathing and a subsequent inability to speak. Furthermore, just because laughter may be deployed strategically in interaction, independent of a person's actual inner emotional state, this does not mean that the laughter is not signaling a certain type of inner state. A signal of this kind may serve as a basis for (Gricean) derivation of a range of distinct context-specific inferences.

The work is squarely oriented in the tradition of conversation analysis, the approach to language and its structure pioneered by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, and their students and colleagues. Chapter 2 is devoted to the theory and methodology of this approach. Laughter is a classic topic for this research tradition, with its view of meaning as overwhelmingly indexical. The same laughter may have very different import in different interactional contexts and in different structural positions in an exchange. Glenn explores in detail the varying properties of laughter depending on whether or not people do it together (Chapter 3), whether it is (first) deployed by a current speaker or by another participant (with significant differences between two-party and multiparty interactions; Chapter 4), including the precise timing of such laughter. Laughter by one is often an invitation to another to laugh along. Glenn explores the significant qualitative differences between laughing with versus at someone (Chapter 5) in terms of one's *alignment* or "alignment," where these distinctions can have major social consequences.

The issues treated in Chapter 6 are among the most important in displaying the need for special care in the analysis of human interaction. Glenn explores the significant qualitative differences among occasions on which one speaker's laughter is immediately responded to by another's. What matters is the nature of the "laughable" to which the first laughter was oriented. For instance, if I laugh while telling about my troubles, this laughter is a display of "resistance" to those troubles. Your laughter in response would also display a downplaying of troubles, but your downplaying of my troubles is a *disalignment* move which could be socially most inappropriate. A more *alignment* solution would be not to laugh,

thus implying “receptiveness” to my troubles. Now, if I laugh while saying something which is meant to be funny, your laughter would display “laugh-receptiveness,” an affiliative contribution. Your failure to laugh would disaffiliate by displaying “laugh-resistance.” This all shows that the production of laughter by B immediately following A’s laughter may have two distinct, indeed opposite, effects in terms of the display of affiliation. This illustrates an analytical notion central to interaction research, namely that the context — in particular, the sequential placement — of a verbal or other action is fundamental to its analysis and interpretation.

Glenn’s book is useful, and an eye-opener. It’s short enough to be quickly readable, while substantial enough to be informative on the current state of findings on this topic in the conversation analytic tradition (little else has been done), as well as raise the reader’s interest in this intriguing phenomenon. But the book is not ground-breaking. Most of what it says has been said in the small series of obscure publications (particularly those by Gail Jefferson) it relies so heavily on. This does not detract, however, from the value of Glenn’s work.

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Note

1. An issue of immediate interest to this question is the organization of laughter in sign language conversation, where laughter may disrupt speech articulation quite differently. Glenn does not address sign language specifically or linguistic diversity generally.