

A Study of the Sequential Environments of Turn-Initial “Laughter” – A Conversation Analytic Approach

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Abstract

“Laughter” is a common language in human society. The “laughter” in the turn-initial position is a special one, which is of great significance for analyzing the social action of the whole turn. Using the method of conversation analysis, this paper explores the sequential environments of “laughter” which is in the turn-initial position of the daily Chinese communication. This analysis finds that “laughter” in the turn-initial position often appears in the following three sequential environments: after the previous speaker’s self-deprecating; the current speaker complains to the listener about the listener or third party; after the previous speaker has stated the difficulty he or she is facing in his or her turn.

Keywords: conversation analysis, Chinese daily communication, laughter, turn-initial position, sequential environments

1. Introduction

“Laughter” has always been a common language all over the world. As an important part of people’s daily conversation, laughter plays a unique role in people’s daily communication. The study of “laughter” from the perspective of conversation analysis can be traced back to the 1970s when the communicative role of “laughter” in English has been investigated abroad (e.g., Jefferson, 1974). But unfortunately, the study of “laughter” in Chinese daily communication is not sufficient. Due to the complexity and dynamics of everyday communication, the position of “laughter” in the conversation is not very fixed, which provides some enlightenment for the

study to explore the sequential environments and interactional functions of “laughter” from various aspects. The initial position of a turn is of great importance and a key aspect of turn design, as it often projects the content of the entire turn, and the actions performed throughout the turn are influenced by the turn construction components at the turn-initial position (Heritage, 2013a). This study attempts to investigate the “laughter” at the turn-initial position from the perspective of conversation analysis, adopting naturally occurring everyday communication in Chinese as the corpus, in order to provide new inspiration and direction for the study of conversation analysis of everyday communication in Chinese. And the

sequential environments of turn-initial laughter will also shed some light on the study of laughter at different positions, which is a new research point for the conversation analysts who are interested in this research aspect.

2. Literature Review

Conversation analysis is a sociological research method that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, proposed and founded by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, providing a new perspective for the scientific study of the “seen but unnoticed” social norms of human communication. Conversation analysis is a “qualitative, empirical, and inductive” scientific approach to the study of communicative phenomena in society. Conversation analysis aims to discover the rules behind human communication by describing, analyzing and interpreting every detail of human communication. Conversation analysis focuses on three aspects of the conversation turns: social action performed by the specific turn, sequence organization, and turn design.

As early as the 1970s, when conversation analysis was first introduced, researchers found that “laughter” could perform social actions as the unique para-linguistic resources of humans and could play a more significant role in human communication (Jefferson, 1974 & 1979). This view also inspires many later conversation analysis researchers to pay more attention to this phenomenon in daily conversation.

From 1970s or so, scholars have attached great significance to the research of laughter. Three founders of CA Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson launch studies to analyze social functions performed by the combination of laughter and other verbal components, and they hold a view that laughter can be initiated to show rapport with each other and maintain interpersonal relationship of social members.

Jefferson makes great contributions to finding out the sequential organization of laughter. She suggests that laughter is usually initiated by one participant and another participant of the interaction will choose to accept or decline this laughter invitation. In a more detailed way, Jefferson thinks if the other participant accepts the laughter invitation, he/she will laugh, if not, he/she may keep silence or turn to another topic or pursue the original topic (Jefferson, 1979). Jefferson also explores laughter further in different interaction activities. She states that in

trouble-telling activity, if the trouble teller ends his/her turn with laughter or design his/her turn with laughter along with the telling and the listener may respond with laughter, this means the laughter of the listener is a kind of “resistance” to the trouble being told; and if the listener doesn’t laugh along with the speaker of trouble but chooses to pursue the trouble or other kinds of action, that means the listener expresses some kind of “acceptance” to the trouble (Jefferson, 1984).

Recently, Holt and Clift make supplementary studies to the sequential analysis of laughter. Holt explores the function of shared laughter in people’s daily communication, that is, shared laughter can be a signal for the conversation participants about the termination of the current topic and the shift to a new topic. Holt also makes many researches on laughter as response. Clift (2016) has found that in the multi-party conversation, any action may initiate laughter and laughter usually comes from the irrelevant party who is not the recipient of the laughable, which may show affiliation with the very recipient of the laughable.

Although rich achievements have been made in the field of conversation analysis about “laughter”, the study about the laughter itself is rare and its interaction functions are often explored with the other linguistic devices. To investigate the rules which govern the initiation of laughter in people’s daily conversation, we will focus on the context of the turn which contains “laughter” at the initial position in Chinese daily conversation in this paper. Because laughter can occur at any place of the turn and the place of laughter is not fixed, in this paper we will concentrate on this kind of laughter. And the position of this laughter will also carry more interactional meanings which can give us more implications about the social norms hidden in the conversations.

3. Research Methodology and Data

The conversation analysis method is adopted in this study. Since “laughter” in people’s daily communication is closely related to other paralinguistic resources, in order to avoid the influence of these non-linguistic factors on the results of this study, the corpus of this study is taken from naturally occurring telephone calls of everyday communication. The corpus is obtained from the Conversation Analysis Research Team of Ocean University of China,

and the corpus is meticulously transcribed according to the Gail Jefferson transcription convention. After the unmotivated examination of the entire corpus, it's found that the usage of "laughter" at the initial position of the turn by the speaker is not random, but it's in some specific sequential environments that the laughter will be used by the interlocutors as the initial turn construction unit (TCU). In the following part, the three sequential environments will be listed and the related data examples will be analyzed too.

4. Discussion

The initial position of the turn is important for analyzing the whole development of the entire turn and, to some extent, influences the social actions performed of the turn (Heritage, 2012a). As a universally used conversational devices for the interlocutors, "laughter" is usually found at the beginning of the turn in two main ways:

(1) The previous speaker laughs while speaking or initiates laughter at the final position of his or her turn, and the current interlocutor initiates laughter at the beginning of his or her turn when the turn transition occurs;

In her study, Jefferson (1979) regards this phenomenon occurring in the daily communication as an adjacency pair consisting of "laughter invitation to the listener" as the first pair part (FPP) and the relevant second pair part (SPP) "laughter acceptance or rejection", which is also the most common sequence position of laughter which occurs in the initial position of a turn. This is also the turn-initial laughter which is in the second turn or the responsive turn. Here is an example of this kind of turn-initial laughter:

As shown in Example 1:

Example 1

- 01 程: hello 啊 hh.
hello a hh
- 02 (.)
- 03 李: hi 咋一直不接电话嘞, 处理奏折呢?
hi zǎ yì zhí bù jiē diàn huà lei, chǔ lǐ
zòu zhé ne?
- 04 程: 啊啊¥最近诸事繁多, 实在不能雨露均沾
05 啊啊¥hh.
a a ¥ zuì jìn zhū shì fán duō, shí zài bù
néng yǔ lù jūn zhān a ¥hh.
- 06 李: hehehe 哎呦, 真把自己当皇上了啊.

hehehe āi yōu, zhēn bǎ zì jǐ dāng huáng
shàng le a.

The conversation episode selected in this example is the beginning sequence of the daily telephone call. The two interlocutors ("程" and "李") are very good friends and they often call each other to talk about their daily life. In line 03, after responding to prior turn's greeting, "李" asks "程" about the reason for not answering the phone call she made earlier and gives the possible reasons she thinks. The latter part of the teasing sequence is given in line 04 and line 05, and the response to the question in line 03-indicating that the reason for not answering the phone is that there is a lot going on - is a response that forms the latter part of the teasing sequence for lines 04-05, and the design of this turn is noteworthy, as it uses the four-letter phrases "there is a lot going on"(诸事繁多) and "share energy to other matters"(雨露均沾). By using the four-word phrases "诸事繁多" and "雨露均沾", "程" constructs her own identity as the "emperor" who deals with the imperial documents, which can be seen in the development of the sequence afterwards. It is noteworthy that the response in 04 and line 05 is in the form of "laughing while talking", which can be regarded as "laughter invitation", and the response in line 06 is in the form of the TCU of "laughter" as the starting position of line 06 indicates that the speaker accepted the "laughter invitation" in the previous turn.

(2) The previous speaker's turn doesn't contain any laughter, and the current speaker initiates laughter at the beginning of his or her turn, which places the laughter at the initial position of the turn.

The focus of this study is the laughter in the second scenario. The previous speaker does not send the "laughter invitation", but the current speaker initiates the laughter which is located at the beginning of the turn as a separate TCU, which means the turn-initial laughter is not intertwined with other conversational devices. In the following section, we will analyze the sequential environments in which the turn-initial laughter occurs to help us reveal more about the usage of laughter in people's conversation.

(i) After the self-deprecating/negative words about oneself by the previous speaker in the prior turn

The self-deprecation and its response in people's

daily communication is very subtle. Preferred and dispreferred structures are also different from other action sequences (Pomerantz, 1984). Analysis of the collected conversation data reveals that when a previous speaker engages in the self-deprecation in his/her turn, the current speaker often initiates “laughter” first in his or her turn and then questions or objects to the rationality of the previous speaker’s self-deprecating behavior. The current speaker usually initiates a “laugh” in his or her turn and, after the “laugh” is completed, questions or objects to the validity of the previous speaker’s self-deprecation.

Example 2

20 旭: 我再等一趟公交吧, 我觉得还挺远的, 因为

21 我们从

wǒ zài děng yī tàng gōng jiāo ba, wǒ jué
de hái tǐng yuǎn de, yīn wèi wǒ men cóng

22 麦岛路停车场(.) 再到麦岛, 还有一段儿<距离>.

mài dǎo lù tíng chē chǎng (.) zài dào mài
dǎo , hái yǒu yī duàn ér < jù lí >.

23 苗: 噢::h, 那行吧, 那你再坐一个吧.

ō::h, nà xíng ba, nà nǐ zài zuò yí gè ba.

24 旭: 哎哟, 我真是傻了,.hh

āi yō, wǒ zhēn shì shǎ le,. hh

25 苗:.hh hehehehehhhehe. Hh [晕了

.hh hehehehehhhehe. Hh [yūn le.

In this example, “旭” and “苗” agree to go to the beach together, but they leave separately and “旭” gets off the wrong bus on the way and calls “苗” to tell her that she got off the wrong bus. Since they have not yet reached their destination, “旭” proposes a solution to “苗” in lines 20-21 that she still needs to take another bus, and in line 23 “苗” first uses the change-of-state token “oh” (Heritage, 2012a) to indicate that she has gotten the information. In line 23, “苗” then acknowledges the solution provided by “旭”, and also suggests that “旭” take another bus. In line 24 “旭” first uses the exclamation “哎哟” to indicate her psychological feelings at this moment, and then in the TCU she negatively evaluates herself as a fool. And the negative assessment is performing the self-deprecation action. “苗” responds in line 25 using the “laughter” at the beginning of the turn and then she affiliates with the stance of the prior speaker’s negative assessment stance.

(ii) The current speaker complains about the

listener or the third party

The execution of the complaining in communication requires the communicator to call on a variety of communicative resources, and the design of the speaker’s turn of the complaint will show people more social norms about the communication, whether the complaint is about the other party or the third party. In this study, the analysis of the data shows that laughter which is located at the beginning of the turn, is often used in the turn-initial position to complain about the listener or the third party, and together with other conversational devices to perform the complaining action and may to some extent, the laughter can mitigate the negative stance of the complaining turn.

Example 3

13 旭: .hhh 不是, 你先别扯那么远呢 (0.2),

.hhh bú shì, nǐ xiān bié chě nà me yuǎn ne

14 你不是快考试 [了?

nǐ bú shì kuài kǎo shì [le?

15 驰: [=那你就不要给我电话了,

[=nà nǐ jiù bù gěi wǒ diàn huà le

16 真是的, 哼.hhh

zhēn shì de, hēng. hhh

17 (0.5)

18 旭: 哎哟喂, 你可真是不识好歹::

āi yō wèi , nǐ kě zhēn shì bù shí hǎo dǎi::

19 驰: .hehehehehe 那你可是真好啊,

.hehehehehe nà nǐ kě shì zhēn hǎo a,

20 真为我着想, 明明就是喜新厌旧, qie 儿你

zhēn wèi wǒ zhuó xiǎng , míng míng jiù
shì xǐ xīn yàn jiù , qie ér nǐ

21 旭: >行行行<, OKOK, 我以后天天给你打.

>xíng xíng xíng<, OKOK, wǒ yǐ hòu tiān
tiān gěi nǐ dǎ,

In this example, “旭” and “驰” have agreed that “旭” will call “驰” every Saturday afternoon at dinner time, and since “旭” has not called “驰” on one day, “驰” calls “旭” to ask why. In line 13, “旭” changes the direction of the sequence in the conversation by using the word “不是” which means “not” at the beginning of her turn. The design of this confirmation-seeking turn shows that the epistemic state of the knowledge of the information of “旭” that “驰” is going to take the exam soon is high (Heritage, 2012a), and that

another action performed by “旭” in this confirmation-seeking turn is to provide a reasonable reason for not calling this week. The rhetorical question of “驰” in line 15 proves that “旭”’s suspicion is correct, and the turn design of “驰” in line 15-16 shows that “驰” uses the negative evaluation word “真是的” and the exclamation “哼” to show her dissatisfaction with “旭”’s behavior. After 0.5 seconds of silence, “旭” uses the exclamation “哎呦喂” at the beginning of the turn in line 18, and then makes a negative comment about “驰”. In line 19, “驰” responds to the comment of “旭” with laughter at the beginning of the turn and then complains about the idea of “旭” that not calling is for the benefit of her own good, leaving time for “驰” to review for the coming exam. This complaint is expressed in a reflexive way, i.e., it is ostensibly that “旭”’s behavior is well thought out, but it is actually a complaint, and it is followed by the pejorative idiom of “like the new and dislike the old”, which explicitly expresses the complaint against the other party, “旭”.

In addition to complaints about the other party, laughter at the beginning of the turn of speech is also often found in the context of a sequence of complaints about a third party, as shown in the following example.

Example 4

- 39 林: 我还忘了问呢.hh (0.2), 丫你那个啥.h-那个
40 科目三能过嘛丫
wǒ hái wàng le wèn ne. hh(0.2), 丫 nǐ nà
gè shá.h-nà gè kē mù sān néng guò ma 丫
41 周: 哎, 啥意思, 我咋就不能过了,heheh,
āi, shá yì sī, wǒ zǎ jiù bù néng guò
le ,heheh,
42 小瞧人, 我虽然这次.hhh 哎(0.2)
xiǎo qiáo rén , wǒ suī rán zhè cì .hhh āi (0.2)
43 没过, 但我<肯定>能过啊.h
mò guò , dàn wǒ < kěn dìng > néng guò a. h
44 林: 这次是咋回事啊, 又下雨了?
hè cì shì zǎ huí shì a , yòu xià yǔ le?
45 周: hehhhehehe, 我们考场的教练,
hehhhehehe, wǒ men kǎo chǎng de jiào
liàn,
46 天天地光说你们这些人啊, 来这儿浪
tiān tiān dì guāng shuō nǐ men zhè xiē rén a,
lái zhè ér làng
47 费时间, 我瞬间无语, 血压升高, 结果::, 再

48 来一次啊::,

fèi shí jiān, wǒ shùn jiān wú yǔ, xuè yā
shēng gāo, jié guǒ::, zài lái yī cì a::,

“林” and “周” are roommates, and in the summer vacation “周” went to take the driving test. In this selected phone conversation episode, “林” asked “周” about her recent driving test. The turn design of “林” in line 39-40 shows that “林” has lower epistemic state about the test than “周”, and the inquiry is made in the form of laughing while talking in order to reduce the possible harm to “周”. In line 41, “周” doesn’t answer the first questions of “林” in the prior turn directly, but then shows her questioning about the prior turn’s question. After that, she gives answer about her driving test. In line 44, “林” asks her friend what is reason for the failure and gives possible reasons. And in line 45, “周” does not give a response that is consistent with the structure of the question but begins her turn with the laughter and then indicates the incompetence of the coach in the driving center and shows her complaint to the third party. In this turn of “周”, the presence of laughter at the beginning mitigates the level of the speaker’s complaint to some extent.

(iii) After the previous speaker has made a statement in his or her turn of speech about the difficulty he or she is facing

The analysis of the corpus reveals that after the previous speaker states a difficult situation, the previous speaker responds to this stated difficulty by first responding with “laughing” in his or her discourse wheel design. Of course, the analysis also reveals that in such a sequential setting, the difficulty stated by the previous speaker is not something that can be solved at the moment, but is a reflection of the communicator’s helplessness in the current situation. As shown in Example 5:

Example 5

例 5

- 46 媛: 欸::我好长时间没回家了, 而且<主要是>w-
47 我没合适的衣服,
wǒ hǎo zhǎng shí jiān méi huí jiā le, ér
qiě< zhǔ yào shì >w- wǒ méi hé shì de yī
fú,
48 这儿<热::>了, 一直从家里带来的那点儿.唉.
zhè ér < rè::> le, yì zhí cóng jiā lǐ dài lái de
nà diǎn ér. āi
49 雨: °hehehe°

- 50 =你们-咱学校还封着呢.hhh? 不是疫情都好
 51 的差不多了啊?
 = nǐ men - zán xué xiào hái fēng zhe
 ne .hhh? bú shì yì qíng dōu hǎo de chà bù
 duō le a?
 52 ((通话噪音))(0.5)
 ((noise sound))(0.5)
 53 媛: 是呀, 我们哪知道呢.hhh(.)
 shì ya, wǒ men nǎ zhī dào ne .hhh(.)
 54 而且那快递也还停着, 是寄也不行, 买[也不
 55 行.hh
 ér qiě nà kuài dì yě hái tíng zhe, shì jì yě bù
 xíng, mǎi [yě bù xíng .hh
 56 雨: 噢.
 Ou.

In this selected conversation episode, “媛” and “雨” are classmates in their postgraduate study time. “媛” is still in the university for a master degree but “雨” is not. In this telephone conversation between them, in lines 46-48, “媛” states to “雨” the difficulties she is facing now, as there is no way to buy suitable summer clothes because the school is closed due to the epidemic and the express delivery is stopped, and in line 49, “雨” responds to “媛” statement of hardship by first giving “laughter” as a response to “媛” statement of insurmountable hardship. She then seeks confirmation from “媛” who have the higher epistemic state (Heritage, 2012a) about the current state of the university. In line 53, “媛” first responds to the question of “雨” with relevant answer “yes”, and she later explains that she is not sure of the reasons for the university’s action; and in lines 54-55, she again expresses the present difficulty to “雨”. In line 56, “雨” uses the receipt token marker “Oh” (Heritage, 2012a) to indicate her epistemic change, that is she has understood the current helpless situation “媛” faced. From this episode, it can be seen that turn-initial laughter is initiated by the speaker in the sequential environments where the prior speaker talks about the current difficulty he or she has faced.

5. Conclusion

In summary, “laughter” at the beginning of the turn is a common para-linguistic conversation device used by the speakers in their daily communication. Compared with other positions or forms of “laughter”, turn-initial “laughter” is often found in the above mentioned sequential

environments. Mastering the related rules of “laughter” in communication can make us become more efficient interlocutors and facilitate better mutual understanding in daily communication.

Because time and space limited, this study only roughly sketches several sequential environments in which communicators use “laughing” at the beginning of his or here turn. We expect that there will be more and more mature and in-depth exploration of this valuable communicative phenomenon in the field of conversation analysis of daily Chinese communication.

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