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Young children's use of laughter as a means of responding to questions

Abstract

Techniques of Conversation Analysis are employed to reach a better understanding of the interactional competencies of young children. Drawing on audio-video recordings of mother-child interactions, this paper examines laughter by young children after questions by the child's mother. It is argued that by laughing the child is showing an orientation to the conditional relevance of a second pair part of an adjacency pair on the production of a first pair part. It is argued that possible bases for young children using laughter after a question are the child's inability to answer a question in full, and their unwillingness to do so. The children studied are in the second year of life and are making the transition from the single to multiword stage. All participants are native speakers of English and speak English throughout the recordings.

Keywords: answers; conversation; development; laughter; parent-child interaction; questions

1 Introduction

Laughter is an important interactional resource. Adults' use of laughter as an interactional resource, rather than a response to something humorous, is relatively well documented. Much less is known about how young children use laughter as an interactional resource. To know more about young children's use of laughter in interaction would be to know more about their developing interactional competencies. The child needs to figure out how to make use of this important interactional resource. Laughter is likely to be especially valuable to young children given the limitations on their linguistic resources. The child also needs to figure out how to use laughter, like adults, in a reflexively accountable way.

Previous research has shown that laughter is not a unitary phenomenon, and that laughter gets its meaning from its placement in its local interactional context including the immediately prior turn. This study discusses the occurrence of laughter by young children in a particular sequential slot: after questions by a parent. The methodology for the study is conversation analysis (CA). CA has provided important insights into the interactional competence of children (see Kidwell, 2013 for an overview and references; see also Forrester, 2015). CA has also provided insights into laughter (see for example, the papers and references in Glenn and Holt, 2013, Wagner and

Vöge, 2010) and into the organisation of question-answer sequences (see Hayano, 2013 for a review; for collections of papers on questions, see de Ruiter, 2012, Freed and Ehrlich, 2010, Steensig and Drew, 2008, Stivers, et al., 2010). CA research dedicated to question-answer sequences in interactions involving young children is of particular relevance to this article. Filipi (2009:82-98) gives coverage to question-answer sequences involving adults and pre-verbal children, outlining some of the things which may be treated by adults as responses to questions, including vocalisations, pointing and laughter. Forrester (2010, 2013, 2015) tracks the development of a single child's ability to identify what he terms, following Sacks, the 'project of the question' (Sacks, 1992: volume I, p. 56), and provides analyses of sequences in which a child produces recognisable questions and answers. Working with recordings of children between 2;1 and 2;10, Keel (2011) shows how parents can follow an evaluative turn by a child with questioning repeats to ratify the child's evaluation, display surprise, project disagreement and delay the granting of a request embodied in the evaluation. Sidnell (2010) argues that "question-intoned" repeats by four-year-olds engaged in play may be used to deal with hearing problems, to deal with speaking problems (word selection, pronunciation) and to challenge the content of a prior turn. He also argues that laughter can be used during a questioning repeat, or in the response to it, to close down a question-repeat sequence. While there is some research on children's ability to produce and respond to questions taking a CA approach, none of this work gives sustained attention to children's use of laughter as a method for responding to questions at this stage of development.

There is some research using CA which provides insights into young children's use of laughter in other sequential contexts. Lerner and Zimmerman (2002) show a child at 1;10 laughing in an object-withdrawal tease sequence, just after presenting a toy figure to another child only to withdraw the figure as the child presenting the toy begins to close his fingers around it. In a study of toddler and parent interaction, rather than laughter per se, Filipi (2009) shows how laughter by a preverbal child at 1;0 can initiate a conversational sequence (pp. 95-96); a child at 1;4 is shown to use laughter as one resource among others to select a next speaker (pp. 181-182). Walker (2013) shows that young children can laugh purposefully after a transgression in order to provide for a reciprocal display of affiliation from the child's mother.

This article seeks to extend existing insights into young children's use of laughter. On the basis of analysis of instances of laughter by young children after a question from a parent, it is argued that young children can use laughter as a means of aligning with the question and showing an orientation to the conditional relevance of an answer to the parent's question, without responding to the question in full. Since laughter is conventionally associated with humour it is worth considering why laughter would be suited to this task. Given the age and developmental stage of the children – Forrester (2013, 2015) reports that the ability to comprehend and respond appropriately to questions is only just beginning to emerge around the age of the children studied here – it is unsurprising that on occasion the children are unable to answer the question in full. Laughter provides children with a valuable resource for handling such occasions. Laughter is readily available to children as reflected by its

detection in the conduct of children as young as 10-11 weeks of age (Nwokah, et al., 1994). Laughter does not have conventional syntactic structure, nor does it require the precise articulatory control needed to preserve lexical identity. These are things which the young child is yet to fully get to grips with. Since laughter does not overtly pursue any particular sequential line, it is equally suited as a response to any question. Laughter provides for a reciprocal display of affiliation from the child's co-participant (Walker, 2013), and it will be seen that in several examples presented here, the mother laughs in response to the young child's laughter.

Research in other interactional contexts shows that laughter has an affinity with conversational difficulties. Auburn and Pollock (2013) argue that children with autism who are low functioning (and may be nonverbal) can use laughter along with other resources to constitute an action as a potential laughable. Wilkinson (2007) shows that adults with aphasia can use laughter during extended sequences of self-initiated repair. Potter and Hepburn (2010) show that adults can use laughter coincident with a lexical item to mark out a problem or insufficiency in the speaker's use of the word. Glenn (2013) show that adults in employment interviews can laugh in response to an interviewer's question as a way of showing an orientation to the inadequacy of the response. Romaniuk (2013) shows that adult interviewees in broadcast news interviews can laugh as a first response to questions to undercut the legitimacy of the question and project a disaffiliative verbal response. These are not occasions where laughter is a response to something humorous.

The data and format of the transcriptions are discussed in section 2. Transcriptions and descriptions of episodes of interaction are presented in section 3. There is discussion of possible bases for the young child's laughter in response to questions from the child's mother section 4. Section 5 presents some conclusions.

2 Data and transcriptions

The data are taken from audio-video recordings of mothers and their children in unscripted play in their own homes (Corrin, 2010). The recordings were made by Juliet Corrin and lodged by her with the University College London CAVA repository (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lscava>) as "JRC-DHCS: Single word-multiword transition." UCL manages password-protected access to the data in the repository by researchers. The signed agreement between the End User (the author) and UCL allows the data in the repository to be used for not-for-profit research and publication. There are six mother-child pairs, each recorded at regular intervals yielding 52 recordings with a total duration of 25 h. All participants are native speakers of English, and speak English throughout the recordings. The children in the corpus are in the age range 1;4-1;11. This age-range is especially useful for the study of early question-answer sequences since Forrester (2013, 2015) reports that the child in his study begins to show conversational skills in question and answering in the first few months of the second year of life, and the earliest example he gives of an utterance treated as a recognisable answer is at 1;5.

Relevant sequences were identified by the author watching and listening to all audio-video recordings in the corpus. All sequences with clear audible characteristics of laughter from the child were included in the initial data set. (While some studies of child laughter take into account facial features in deciding whether or not there is laughter, such features were not considered a requirement here for practical reasons: The movements of the participants were unrestricted, with the result that audible laughter could occur while the face could not be seen.) Just over 300 sequences were identified. This larger data-set includes many instances of laughter which seem to be potentially spontaneous reactions, rather than being interactionally ordered. Within this larger data-set, 23 instances of child laughter following a question from the child's mother were identified, with at least one instance from each mother-child pair. This set accounts for only a small proportion of the whole data-set. However, in CA frequency of occurrence alone does not justify analytic attention, nor does infrequency of occurrence preclude investigation (Schegloff, 1993). A sample of instances of child laughter following a question from the child's mother is presented and discussed.

The presentation transcriptions are intended capture sequential organisation and aspects of pronunciation using conventions in widespread use in CA (Jefferson, 2004). Modifications to orthography are done in a way which is sensitive to relevant details and to readability. Relevant questions are identified by arrows in the left margin; relevant occurrences of laughter are identified by double arrows. Further relevant features are presented in italics and double brackets at the end of the line of transcription to which they relate. Tracings of video screenshots are shown with some of the transcriptions to help the reader follow the discussion. Codes at the top of the transcriptions identify where in the original corpus the transcribed excerpts can be found. When discussing specific examples all mothers will be referred to in transcriptions as "M" and all children as "Ch".

3 Exemplification

This section presents specific episodes where young children laugh in response to questions from their mothers. In (1) M and Ch are sitting on the floor, either side of a jigsaw puzzle. Near the start of the excerpt Ch picks up a puzzle piece off the floor.

(1) RB21-02-19m00s. 1;8.



start of line 7

- 1 Ch: guh:s ((Ch leans forward))
 2 (0.6)
 3 Ch: hneeuH ((Ch picks up puzzle piece))
 4 (0.6)
 5 Ch: arah (.) ahts ((Ch looking down at puzzle piece and pointing))
 6 (1.2)
 7 M: it's a what ((M leans in towards Ch))
 8 (0.2)
 9 Ch: e:h
 10 (0.4)
 11 M: it's a drum
 12 (2.0)
 13 →M: can you say drum
 14 ⇒Ch: ih hey hih
 15 (2.5)
 16 M: [drum
 17 Ch: [eh
 18 (1.2) ((0.6 s into silence Ch looks into M's face))
 19 M: drum
 20 (3.0) ((Ch looks away from M, puts puzzle piece down, picks up a ball and crawls away))
 21 Ch: ooh ooh (bw)ooH

M treats Ch's utterance at line 5 as an attempt to provide a label for the puzzle piece that he has just picked up, asking him to repeat what he has said while he was pointing at it ("it's a what", line 7). After providing the label for herself at line 11 ("it's a drum"), M asks Ch "can you say drum" (line 13). Since this occurs within the context of picture-labelling, M's question makes relevant a production of "drum" by Ch (on the sequential organisation of labelling sequences involving parents and children see Tarplee, 1996, 2010). However, rather than respond to M's question in full, Ch laughs (line 14). The timing of the laughter, just after M's turn, promotes an understanding of the laughter as responsive to M's turn rather than happenstance. The timing of the laughter also suggests that Ch recognises that M's question has made a response from him relevant. This laughter figures as a marker of Ch's recognition that M's question has made a response from him relevant without responding in full to M's question. In other words, by laughing in the slot provided for an answer to the question, Ch is showing an orientation to the conditional relevance of a second pair part of an adjacency pair on the production of a first pair part (Schegloff, 1968).

In (2) M is sitting on the floor while Ch stands beside her. At the start of the excerpt M is holding a book.

(2) NS10-07-22m55s. 1;6.



start of line 1

- 1 M: there (you/we) are
 2 (1.0) ((M puts book on floor; M and Ch are looking at book))
 3 M: what's this "in the forest we like to listen to the birds singing" ((reading))
 4 (1.0) ((M points at book))
 5 →M: (°°what's he called°°) °what's that one°
 6 (2.2)
 7 ⇒Ch: hhih
 8 M: mhihhih ((M looks to Ch))
 9 (.)
 10 Ch: [what] is he ((Ch looks to M))
 11 M: [wuh]
 12 (.)
 13 M: I think it's a raccoon
 14 (1.2)
 15 Ch: oh
 16 M: he stopped to pick the berries

At line 5 M asks Ch a question while pointing at the book on the floor ("°°what's that one°°"). This makes relevant an answer from Ch in which she identifies a character in the book in front of them. More than two seconds of silence follow (line 6). Rather than answering M's question in full, Ch laughs (line 7). The laughter allows Ch to display her recognition that a response from her has been made relevant, without responding in full with an answer to the question. This is followed immediately by reciprocal laughter from M (line 8), produced as she turns her head to look at Ch.

In (3), M and Ch are both sitting on the floor. M is holding a toy teddy bear which is wearing a tie. Ch is holding a large puzzle piece in his right hand at the start of the excerpt.

(3) RB21-02-31m08s. 1;8.



start of line 1



during line 14

- 1 M: what goes round teddy's neck ((Ch begins to stand up))
 2 (0.5)
 3 Ch: owah
 4 (0.4)
 5 →M: Robin what's round teddy's neck
 6 (0.3)
 7 ⇒Ch: ahee hee
 8 (0.3)
 9 M: tie
 10 (0.3)
 11 Ch: wahn ((Ch starts to walk towards M))
 12 (0.3)
 13 Ch: uuhh ((Ch is pointing at M's chest))
 14 M: tie
 15 (0.2)
 16 M: mummy doesn't wear a tie but daddy wears a tie doesn't he

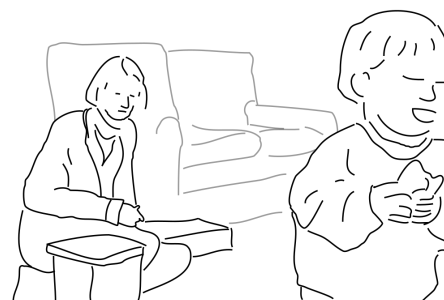
M asks Ch "what's round teddy's neck" (line 5). This makes relevant the production of a label ("tie") from Ch. Instead of supplying that label, after a silence Ch laughs (line 7). His laughter in response to the question shows his recognition that he is required to respond to M's turn, without responding in full with an answer to the question.

In (4) M and Ch are sitting on the floor. Ch is holding the family dog's bone. The dog (Daisy) left the immediate environment of the recording for another part of the house shortly before the start of the excerpt. Vocal behaviour of the researcher (R), who is standing behind the camera, is included in the transcription.

(4) RB07-02-17m39s. 1;7.



start of line 1



during line 18

- 1 M: what's that
 2 (0.5)
 3 M: what is it
 4 (0.8)
 5 Ch: gone ((turns head away from M))
 6 (0.9) ((turns head back to M))
 7 M: hm it's a wh[at
 8 Ch: [boo:
 9 (0.3)
 10 M: bone that's right (.) Daisy's bone ((Ch starts to stand up))
 11 (0.6)
 12 Ch: heh::
 13 (0.2)
 14 M: can you say Daisy's bone
 15 (2.3) ((Ch turns away from M))
 16 →M: where are you going
 17 (0.4) ((Ch starts to run, heading away from M and past the camera))
 18 ⇒Ch: uh uh uh
 19 (0.4)
 20 ⇒Ch: ah ah ahah ey ((M looks to R))
 21 M: mmhm h[mm ((laughing))
 22 R: [ah hih hih
 23 M: oi subject come [back
 24 R: [.hhh

Building on what M has ratified as a successful labelling of the dog's bone by Ch (line 7-10) M goes on to pursue a more elaborate production from Ch including the name of the dog (line 14). During M's turn Ch continues to stand up while holding the dog's bone in his hands. In the silence which follows M's turn (line 15) Ch completes his move to stand up and turns away from M. Once turned away from M, and as he starts to walk away from her, M asks "where are you going" (line 16). Ch continues to move away from her, speeding up as he does so. As he speeds up he produces two bursts of laughter (lines 18 and 20). The first burst of laughter comes shortly after M's question at line 16 and occupies the slot for an answer. As he runs past the camera he can be seen to be smiling: a tracing of a screenshot taken during line 18 is shown in (4). As in (1)-(3) there is no attempt by Ch to respond in full to M's question.

In (5) M and Ch are sitting on the floor. Ch is holding two books behind his back.

(5) KP21-08-08m55s. 1;9.



start of line 1



during line 3

- 1 M: where have they gone
 2 (1.8) ((Ch stretches out his arm while holding one of the books; he turns away from M to look at it))
 3 M: oh
 4 (0.4)
 5 M: I can see it is it behind Kevin's back ((Ch retracts outstretched arm; he turns back to M))
 6 (1.0)
 7 →M: is Kevin hiding them ((Ch drops the books))
 8 (1.0) ((Ch begins to stand up))
 9 ⇒Ch: ahahahahh
 10 (0.4)
 11 Ch: esuh:: day jah
 12 M: you were hiding them weren't you ((Ch picks up one of the books))

M goes along with Ch's hiding of the books, asking "where have they gone" (line 1). Ch stretches out his arm while holding one of the books and turns away from M to look at it (line 2). This continues the tease. M continues to go along with the tease, acknowledging that she is able to see the book (lines 3-5). Once Ch has hidden the books behind his back again, M first asks "is it behind Kevin's back" (line 5), and then when no answer is forthcoming (line 6) she asks "is Kevin hiding them" (line 7). Ch does not answer this question, but laughs (line 9).

In summary, in each of (1)-(5), a mother asks a young child a question. In each case, rather than respond in full with an answer made relevant by the question, the young child laughs. This shows the young child's recognition that the mothers' questions make relevant a response, or set of responses, while also showing they are not going to respond in full: the laughter stands as a surrogate for an answer. By laughing in the slot provided for an answer to the question the children are showing on orientation to the conditional relevance of a second pair part of an adjacency pair on the production of a first pair part. The next section discusses possible bases for the young child's production of laughter in response to the questions.

4 Discussion

The exemplars in (1)-(5) show that rather than respond in full with an answer, young children can laugh in response to mothers' questions. The laughter shows an

orientation to the conditional relevance of an answer to the mother's question, without the child responding in full. This section explores possible bases for young children's laughter after a mother's question. It is argued that children can use laughter after mothers' questions to deal with two distinct interactional contingencies: where they are unable to answer a question, and where they are unwilling to do so.

An account which uses notions of ability and willingness may seem to run against the analytic principles of CA. Enfield (2013) argues that while CA values analysis of observable behaviour over inferences concerning cognition and inner mental states, cognition does have a role to play in understanding and accounting for observable behaviour. This may be why it is not at all difficult to find studies in the CA tradition which make use of notions of ability and willingness to account for participants' observable conduct. The following is a small sample of references to the ability of interactants to do something. They were selected for their provenance and pertinence to the current study (emphasis added):

The clients [adults with intellectual disabilities] are supposed to be asking each other these questions [about the day's activities], but in fact they are *unable* to do so in any sustained fashion, and staff routinely take over. (Antaki, 2013:17)

almost all individuals, regardless of aphasia type or severity, have persistent word finding difficulties, and many will also be *unable* to achieve correct production of a word in the face of a motor speech difficulty, even when a target has been produced for immediate repetition (Beeke, et al., 2013:801-802)

FMD [functional memory disorder] patients were able to attend to multiple parts of a question. . . . In contrast, ND [neurodegenerative] patients experienced difficulties, frequently replying to single components of the compound questions, and were *unable* to recall and respond to other aspects of the original question (Eisey, et al., 2015:1074)

the entire body is deployed to organize embodied stances toward the actions of others: such stances portray the children [putting off directives in family interactions] as being "unhappy," "helpless," or "tired," or otherwise *unable* to accomplish the request (Goodwin, et al., 2012:34)

The following is a small sample of references to the willingness of interactants to do something (emphasis added):

By contrast, in request sequences, what is at stake is not interest, sympathy or revelation. Instead it is degrees of *willingness* to comply with what is being requested. (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014:248)

By an adjacently placed second, a speaker can show that he understood what a prior aimed at, and that he is *willing* to go along with that. (Heritage and Watson, 1980:254)

The turn initial positioning of a 'please' within young children's requests is particularly associated with pleading, pleading for the reversal of recipient *unwillingness* to grant a request in a sequential position in which some evidence of this *unwillingness* has been made available to the child. (Wootton, 2005:199)

In some cases, willingness and ability are discussed together as ways of explaining observed conduct (emphasis added):

the aphasic speaker is regularly *unable* to produce the particular word or phrase made relevant by the [first pair-part where the answer is known to its producer], and this can mean that a prolonged repair sequence occurs, with the aphasic speaker recurrently trying and failing to produce the required linguistic item... aphasic speakers often display *unwillingness* or discontent in response to [such first pair-parts] (Wilkinson, 2014:228-9)

Directives work to actively reduce or manage contingencies during the delivery of the directive. Unlike requests, they are not structurally designed to project non-compliance on the basis of being *unwilling* or *unable* to comply. (Craven and Potter, 2010:437)

The form he [a caller to a doctor's surgery] chooses displays him. . . as someone who is merely *wondering if* [emphasis in original]; he avoids questioning the doctor's *ability* or *willingness* to help, which he could have done by using a modal verb. (Curl and Drew, 2008:145)

Ability and willingness are thus clearly within the remit of analyses employing a CA methodology. The child's willingness and ability to answer a question in full will be discussed here as possible bases laughing after questions rather than providing an answer which the question made relevant. Ability and willingness on the part of the child do not arise from intuition but rather from the same analytic process which leads to other kinds of conclusions about observable conduct. The general sense of the children's ability is also taken into account: complex turns at talk which are readily available to conversational partners may simply be out of the child's reach in terms of comprehension, production, or both.

In (1) there is evidence in the run-up to M's question that Ch is unable to answer in such a way that will meet the expectations of M's question. M's "it's a what" (line 7) initiates repair on what she takes as an attempt by Ch to describe what is on the puzzle piece he has just picked up. What Ch produces in response is transcribed in line 9 as "e:h" and can be rendered in IPA notation as [əɛːə]. It is produced with a wide pitch span, rising-falling pitch contour and a single loudness peak. While Ch's production may correspond to a word of one syllable, it is lacking many of the articulatory features of a canonical production of "drum": there are no initial or final closures, and the vowel quality is some way from that of a canonical production. Rather than treating Ch's utterance at line 9 as an acceptable production of "drum",

M provides a turn which labels the piece with no recognition of what Ch has offered ("it's a drum", line 11). One option available to Ch at this point is to repeat the relevant portion of M's turn as a way of confirming his understanding. However, he does not (line 12). Evidently unable to respond in full to M's question at line 13 by producing "drum", Ch laughs. Following Ch's laughter at line 14 of (1) there are further indications that he is unable to produce an acceptable version of "drum". Following M's repeat of "drum" at line 16, Ch again passes up on the opportunity he might have taken to produce his own version and remains silent (line 18). This is followed by M's further pursuit of a production by Ch (line 19), treating Ch as having failed to produce an acceptable version in his previous utterances. Again, M's turn fails to receive a compliant response from Ch who crawls away (lines 20-21).

Along similar lines to (1), in (2) there is evidence that Ch is having difficulty with M's question. During the silence after M's question (line 6), M and Ch are both looking at the book. There is no evidence that the delay in Ch's response results from being distracted from the ongoing sequence. However, there is evidence to suggest that Ch is having difficulty with M's question. This difficulty is first signalled by the silence. At line 10 Ch asks M directly what she was asking about at line 5. This pursuit by Ch suggests difficulty with M's question at line 5 and elaborates on why Ch did not respond in full to it: she is unable to answer the question. It provides evidence of Ch's recognition that M's question has made a response from her relevant, and that what is needed is a labelling of the character in the book. Ch's receipt of M's answer at line 13 provides further evidence that she was unable to respond in full to M's question at line 5. Ch's "oh" (line 15) proposes that on hearing M's answer at line 13 she has undergone a change of state of knowledge (Heritage, 1984), thus claiming that she did not have the knowledge required to respond in full at line 7. Note too M's reciprocal laughter at line 8 which is a display of affiliation with Ch. This provides insights into the action M is taking Ch's laughter to be performing: something which is especially delicate and which provides for a display of affiliation. Ch being unable to answer a question is just such a delicate matter. In sum, as in (1), in (2) Ch uses laughter in response to a question as a marker of her recognition that M's question has made a response relevant, without responding in full.

As in (1) and (2), in (3) there is evidence from elsewhere in the sequence that Ch is unable to respond to the M's question in full. M's question at line 5 is a successive attempt to get Ch to produce an acceptable version of the label, with an earlier version of the question at line 1. Ch's response to that question (line 3) was treated by M as insufficient when she produced a successive version of the question at line 5. There is evidence from what follows Ch's laughter at line 7 that M considers Ch's response first as insufficient in terms of fulfilling the expectations of her question, and second as arising from Ch's inability to respond in full. After the laughter, at line 9, M produces a model answer for Ch to copy. The only reason for M to do this in this context is if she considers him as having difficulty in producing the item. This is confirmed by his repeat which can be rendered in IPA notation as [uɑ̃:]: some way from a canonical production. M's follow-up to Ch's laughter in response to her question, and Ch's response to that follow-up, support the view that Ch is unable to respond in full to M's question at line 5.

In summary, in each of (1)-(3) young children are asked questions by their mothers. Instead of responding in full the children laugh. There is evidence in the run-up to the questions and in the aftermath that the children are unable to answer those questions in full. Even though they seem to be unable to respond in full, by laughing the children are showing an orientation to the conditional relevance of answers to the questions by responding in the slot following the question.

In some cases young children use laughter after questions where there seems, from the interaction, to be an issue over their willingness to respond in full. For example, in (4) Ch certainly seems to have the interactional resources to provide an answer to M's question. This is evident from what follows in the interaction:

(4) continued

- 25 R: she's (gone)
 26 (M:) huh huh .hih
 27 M: Daisy ((to dog))
 28 (0.2)
 29 R: ha (.) un (.) ha ha
 30 (0.4)
 31 R: .hih .hih hih .hih
 32 Ch: Daisy ((M beckons in child's direction))
 33 (0.4)
 34 M: well you come here and [wait for Daisy to] come
 35 R: [where's Daisy]
 36 (1.0)
 37 M: where's Daisy gone
 38 (0.6)
 39 Ch: in there
 40 (0.3)
 41 M: is she there
 42 (0.5)
 43 M: where
 44 (0.8)
 45 Ch: in there
 46 (2.3) ((M nods))
 47 M: Daisy ((to dog))
 48 (0.8)
 49 M: Daisy ((to dog))

In this excerpt it becomes clear that Ch has left to take Daisy her bone: notice in particular M's repeated efforts to get the dog to return at lines 27, 47 and 49, as well as her instruction to Ch for him to wait for the dog to come back (line 34) and an enquiry to Ch about the dog's whereabouts (line 37). Notice too that twice Ch answers M's questions about Daisy's location ("in there" at lines 39 and 45). These turns could have served as answers to M's earlier question at line 16 which only received laughter as a response. These responsive turns at lines 39 and 45 therefore provide important evidence that Ch could, in principle, have provided an answer to

M's question at line 16. He can also evidently use the name of the dog in a communicatively meaningful way (line 32), which would also have served as a telegraphic answer to M's question at line 16 indicating that the reason for his departure was to pursue the dog. Ch's laughter in response to M's question at line 16, then, does not seem to be a matter of Ch lacking the resources to answer. This makes this example rather different from those in (1)-(3) where there was evidence that the children were having difficulty in providing an answer. In (4) Ch is evidently able to respond to M's question. The argument here is that while he is able to respond in full, he is unwilling to do so. It is worth considering why he might be unwilling to answer in full.

Ch's laughter following M's question in (4) is not compatible with M's ongoing project. His bodily orientation at the point where he laughs gives the laughter a somewhat equivocal status as a response to M's question. However, like all other cases presented here, it does occupy the slot for answer to M's question. While the laughter is not compatible with M's ongoing project of finding out where he is going, it is compatible with his own project of departing. Furthermore, the laughter seems to recognise the playful transgression his departure represents (Walker, 2013). To provide a full answer to M's question would be to continue his engagement with M when his primary concern is to take the bone he is carrying to Daisy. Furthermore, providing such an answer would give M an opportunity to topicalise his response (Schegloff, 2007:155-158) and, potentially, to tell him to return to her: something which would be incompatible with his apparent enthusiasm for taking the bone to the dog. From what happens soon after, it seems Ch would be quite right to expect that M would call him back had he answered her question at line 16: she calls him back at line 23 and line 34, as well as beckoning to him as a signal to return (line 32). By laughing rather than answering M's question at line 16, Ch furthers his own project of departure and disengagement from M, where answering would have complied with the ongoing interactional sequence and would have risked undermining his project.

In (5) the factually correct answer to M's question ("yes" or one of its variants) is obvious and, it is clear that Ch can produce "yes" in response to a question as he does so elsewhere in the recording. It seems from the interaction surrounding M's question that there is no issue with Ch's ability to produce an answer, cf. (1)-(4). A bald "yes" response would comply with and fulfil the expectations of M's question at line 7. It seems that Ch is unwilling, rather than unable, to produce that response. Unlike an answer ("yes", for example), Ch's laughter is well fitted to his ongoing project of teasing M: his ostentatious moving of the books and change of gaze from M to the books and back again are clearly part of a game of hiding, then showing, then hiding the books. As in (4), there seems to be a connection between the young child's laughter and playful, transgressive behaviour.

While ability and willingness account for some cases of child laughter in response to questions from M, there are cases where these notions cannot be straightforwardly applied. An example is shown in (6), the final example to be presented. M and Ch are looking at a 'Winnie the Pooh' story book. Ch is sitting on M's lap.

(6) PW21-02-25m23s. 1;8.



start of line 22

- 22 M: he's still got a hat on
 23 (0.2)
 24 M: that's Owl
 25 (0.8)
 26 →M: what does Owl say
 27 (2.0) *((at 1.8 Ch points to another part of the page))*
 28 ⇒Ch: ih hih hih heh
 29 (0.2)
 30 Ch: hat
 31 (0.2)
 32 M: h(h)e h(h)asn't got a hat on that's his ears that's Piglet's funny ears
 33 (1.6)
 34 M: it looks like a hat but it's his ears

At line 26 M asks Ch “what does Owl say”. Rather than responding in full to M’s question, Ch begins to point at another part of the book and laughs (line 28). His production of “hat” just after the laughter (line 30) makes explicit a possible basis for the laughter which is not connected to his ability or willingness to answer in full. The laughter is connected to an apparent noticing by Ch (a noticing which it turns out is mistaken: see line 32). Rather than speaking to the matter of M’s question, by withholding an answer and laughing instead Ch gets to return to an activity he has been engaged in previously with some enthusiasm: identifying characters in the book who wear hats. Some of this activity is shown in (6’); the last line is the first line of the transcription in (6).

(6') leading up to (6)

- 1 Ch: hat ((Ch pointing at book))
 2 (0.2)
 3 M: mm Owl's got a hat on
 4 (1.8) ((Ch retracts point, then points at book))
 5 Ch: hat
 6 (0.2)
 7 M: mm Christopher Robin's got a hat on (.) he's got a hat in his
 8 hand too ((Ch retracts point at end of turn))
 9 (2.5) ((Ch points at book))
 10 Ch: hhat
 11 M: mm [Owl's got] a hat ((Ch retracts point))
 12 Ch: [hat]
 13 (1.1)
 14 Ch: .hhh hih
 15 (0.8)
 16 M: look at them they've all got hats on ((Ch turns to next page))
 17 (.)
 18 M: !t .huh
 19 (0.9)
 20 Ch: hat ((Ch points at book))
 21 (0.3)
 22 M: he's still got a hat on

By laughing in response to M's question at line 26 rather than answering it in full Ch facilitates a return to this earlier activity of identifying hats. M continues with talk about Piglet's 'hat' (which is in fact his ears: line 32), and never returns to the matter of what Owl says. In summary, in (4)-(6) the children are not answering their mothers' questions, and using laughter as part of a pursuit of their own interactional line.

5 Conclusions

Using exemplars drawn from video-recorded interactions between young children and their mothers, this study has shown that children can make interactionally meaningful use of laughter after questions from their mothers instead of producing the answers which the questions made relevant. The laughter registers the children's understanding that responses have been made relevant by the mothers' questions, without responding in full. This is a distinct usage of laughter in interaction and shows signs of adult-like, non-humorous usages of laughter. The laughter is not concerned with the early production of humour (Hoicka and Akhtar, 2012): rather, it is a means for the child to align with the question without responding in full. Two possible bases for laughter by a young child after a question have been identified: the children may be unable to answer the question in full, or they may be unwilling to do so.

There are several lines of analytic enquiry which could now be pursued. For instance, systematic consideration of the methods available to the children for responding to questions is beyond the scope of this paper. There has been no consideration of

longitudinal developments in question responses. The current findings, along with Forrester's case study of a single child's developing ability to identify and respond to questions (Forrester, 2013, 2015), suggest that this would be worth closer attention even at a very young age. Another possible line of enquiry would be into other usages of laughter by young children without particular reference to questions. It has been shown previously that laughter has a particular affinity with transgressions (Walker, 2013). Taking those findings together with the findings of this study, it seems likely there will be other orderly usages.

This study is important in several respects. It has provided further insights into the interactional competencies of young children. To focus on the use of laughter after questions as pointing to a lack of competence on the part of the children would be to risk losing sight of just how much they must be able to do in order to respond in such a way. The children can evidently identify, even at this young age, that the mother's turn has made a response from them relevant, even if they do not provide it. In other words, they understand the conditional relevance of a second pair part (an answer) on the production of a first (a question). The study has shed light on the organisation of question-answer sequences: it has shown how participants can respond to questions without providing a relevant response. The study has also documented more fully a distinct usage of laughter as a response to a question. This study thus complements existing work on questions and on laughter in adult-adult interaction. The study has emphasised the value of CA as a method for studying the interactional competencies of young children, laughter and question-answer sequences. Based on the findings of this study, it is the contention of this article that young children can use laughter as a response to questions that they are unwilling or unable to respond to in full. It is also the contention of this article that careful attention to the organisation of single episodes of interaction is key in better understanding the communicative competencies of young children.

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