

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE COURSE OF A JOKE'S TELLING IN CONVERSATION

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0.0 In this paper we examine the sequential organization of the telling of a dirty joke in conversation.<sup>1</sup> For the organization of the joke and also of its telling we find that there is a single most decisive feature: the joke is built in the form of a story. The decisiveness of that feature involves the fact that, there being means for sequentially organizing the telling of a story in conversation, the sequential organization of the telling of this joke's being built in the form of a story is largely given by those means. This telling is composed, as for stories, of three serially ordered and adjacently placed types of sequences which we call the preface, the telling, and the response sequences. We shall proceed by considering each of them in turn, intending that the adequacy of such a characterization as is developed in terms of these types for these materials will provide support to our proposal that the joke's construction in the form of a story is indeed its decisive feature.

0.1 In what follows we shall largely be concerned to subject the utterances of the fragment, of which we present a transcription at the close of this section, to analysis in terms of how they figure in the three types of sequences we have proposed to constitute organizational parts of the telling. In this endeavor one recurrent theme may be extracted for introductory comment. While the three types, as types, are serially ordered and adjacently placed, it obviously is incorrect to propose that given the initiation of some particular preface, a telling and a response sequence are sure to occur, or to occur without other materials intervening. There are built-in conditions for terminating a telling before the completion of a response sequence; at the preface, for example, if the joke can be recognized as known, by recipients, from the characterization of it that occurs in the preface. But potential conditions for a termination do not always result in that happening, as is illustrated a variety of times in the ensuing discussion, for example, at sections 1.2-1.4.

Supposing that each sequence type can be put together to contain such a set of components as will make a subsequent type appropriate, and can also

take a course which makes that type's completion or the occurrence of its subsequent problematic, the fragment we are here concerned with is of particular interest because in it the telling is brought to completion though each part contains materials which could inhibit that happening. If no materials inconsistent with continuation occur, a characterization of the course of the telling can be readily developed. Here what we shall be trying to do is to characterize a telling course that goes to completion across the recurrent presence of materials that could yield termination. Our focus then is with determining how and where potentially terminative materials are introduced, how they can be incorporated within a telling's course, and the sorts of effects other than terminative they can have.

Here then is the fragment of conversation within which the joke is told.<sup>2</sup> Its teller, whom we pseudonymize as 'Ken,' is, like 'Roger' and 'Al,' a teenager around sixteen–seventeen years old. 'Dan' is an adult and the therapist in what is a group therapy session which the others attend, a fact which never again figures in our discussion.

1. Ken: You wanna hear muh-eh my sister told me a story
2. last night.
3. Roger: I don't wanna hear it. But if you must,  
(I.O)
4. Al: What's purple an' an island. Grape– Britain.
5. That's what iz sis//ter –
6. Ken: No. To stun me she says uh there was these three
7. girls an' they just got married?
8. Roger: Ehhh//hehh hhh hhh
9. Ken: An' uh –
10. Roger: [Hey waita se(h)cond.
11. Ken: ( ) –
12. Al: Heh!
13. Roger: Drag tha(h)t by agai(h)n hehh//hehh
14. Ken: There – There was these three *girls*. And they
15. were all *sisters*. An' they'd just got married
16. to three *brothers*.
17. Roger: You better have a long talk with you sis//ter.
18. Ken: Waita – waita min//ute.
19. Roger: Oh. // Three brothers.
20. Al: Eheh
21. Al: eh//heh!
22. Ken: And uh – // so–
23. Al: The brothers of these sisters.
24. Ken: No they're different – mhh/hh
25. Al: heh
26. Ken: You know different families. // (no link-up.)

27. Roger: 'S closer thn before, // hhh  
 28. Ken: So –  
 29. Al: Heh! hh hh  
 30. Ken: *Quiet.*  
 31. Al: hh hh // hhhh  
 32. Ken: So, first of all, that night, they're – on their  
 33. honeymoon the – uh mother-in-law, says – (to 'em) well  
 34. why, don'tcha all spend the night here an' then you  
 35. cn go on yer honeymoon in the *morning*. First night,  
 36. th'mother waiks up t'the first door an' she hears  
 37. this *uuuuuuuuuuuhh!* hh Second door is *HHOOOOHHH!*  
 38. Third door there's nothing. She stands there fer about  
 39. *twunny-five* minutes waiting fer sumpna happen, –  
 40. nuthin.  
 (1.0)  
 41. Ken: Next morning she talks t'the first daughter, and she  
 42. sz – uh how come ya – how com y'went *YEEEEEEAAAAGGGHH*  
 43. last night, 'n daughter sez well, it *tickled* mommy,  
 44. 'n second girl, how come ya screamed. Oh mommy it  
 45. *hurts*. hh Third girl, walks up t'her – why didn'  
 46. ya *say* anything last night. *W'you* told me it was  
 47. always impolite t'talk with my mouth full,  
 (2.0)  
 48. Ken: hh hyok hyok,  
 (1.0)  
 49. Ken: Hyok.  
 (3.0)  
 50. Al: *HA-HA-HA-HA,*  
 51. Ken: eh eh heh heh // hehhh  
 52. (Al): hehhhehhheh hhh  
 53. Roger: Delayed reactio(h)n  
 54. Al: hehh I hadtuh think // about it awhile you know?  
 55. Roger: hhh heh  
 (1.0)  
 56. Roger: hehh hh hehh hhh You mean the deep hidden meaning  
 57. there doesn't hitcha right awa(hh)y heh heh //  
 58. hehhhhhh hehhhhhh  
 59. Al: hh hhh // hhh  
 60. (Dan): (yeh. I // guess so.)  
 61. Al: What he meant to say is that – that uhm  
 (1.0)  
 62. Roger: Ki//nda got psychological over//tones ( )  
 63. Al: ( )  
 64. Ken: Little sister's gittin // *older*.  
 65. (Roger): hehh hh hehh

66. Ken: ehheh heh that's what I *mea(h)n* tuh // say,  
 67. Dan: *Sounds* like it,  
 68. Ken: Fer twelve years old tellin me – I didn't even // know –  
 69. Roger: How d'ya know she's just not repeating what she heard  
 70. an' doesn't know what // it means.  
 71. Al: She have to explain it to ya Ken?  
 72. Ken: Yeah, she had to explain me to detail to me,  
           (0.7)  
 73. Al: Okay, good. Gladju gotta sister that knows //  
 74. something,  
 75. Ken: hh hhh  
 76. Ken: She told me she was eating a hot dog,  
           (4.0)  
 77. Ken: hh  
 78. Roger: Wha' does that mean,  
 79. Ken: hh hh  
 80. Al: Yeah c'mon // explain it // to us,  
 81. Ken: heh  
 82. Ken: heh  
 83. Al: Explain // us – explain everything you know Ken,  
 84. Ken: hhh! Nuh I (*hh*) *du(h)nno* I just said that  
 85. Al: Explain everything.

1.0 Stories and jokes built in the form of stories, told in conversation, properly have their telling begun, as this one does (see lines 1–6), with what we call a preface sequence. In one common sort which does involve the appropriateness of initiation of its subsequent, the telling sequence, the preface can take a minimal length of two turns, the first involving talk by the intending teller and the second by an intended recipient. We shall develop a characterization of the preface sequence of our fragment by first considering such features as it has in common with minimals like it that do make the telling sequence appropriate, thereafter proceeding to examine its variant course in some detail. This procedure will be repeated when, subsequently, we consider the telling and response sequences.

Prefaces with two utterance minimal courses, whose courses make initiation of a telling appropriate, can involve, first, a party, the intending teller, producing an utterance that combinedly contains such sequentially relevant components as: an offer to tell or a request for a chance to tell the joke or story; an initial characterization of it; some reference to the time of the story events' occurrence or of the joke's reception; and, for jokes particularly, a reference to whom it was received from if its prior teller is known or known of by recipients. Such a group of components should be packed into an utterance whose first possible completion, which

will usually coincide with its first sentence's first possible completion, is supposably the point of transition from intending teller's talk to recipient reply.<sup>3</sup> If such a first utterance is followed by another, done by an intended recipient of the story or joke, which accepts or requests the telling, then the preface sequence can take a minimal length, be two turns long, and thereafter the telling sequence can be undertaken, intending teller re-acquiring the floor for that project.

If an intending teller's first utterance contains such components each of them can be sequentially operative, and in different ways. The 'offer' component is concerned with the turn-to-turn organization of the preface sequence, operating to provide that a next turn should be occupied with one of the methodic responses to an offer, e.g., an acceptance. The mentioning of the source provides information which recipients can use to determine whether they might know the joke. A telling being contingent on a joke's supposed supposable unknownness to recipients, the mentioning of the source gives recipients material with which they might initially consider the possibility that the joke is known to them, and exhibits to them that teller is oriented to that contingency of the telling. If recipients have heard one recently from the same source they can proceed to check out whether it is the intended joke that they know. The initial characterization (which can involve, e.g., 'a real dirty joke,' 'something wonderful,' 'a really odd thing,' and the like) can serve to motivate a positive reply, can be used in developing a negative one ('this is no time for jokes'), and seems to have as a distinctive structural job informing recipients about the sort of response teller seeks after his telling, thereby aiding recipients in listening throughout to find, from the telling, such materials as are relevant to the production of such a response and to its positioning. For example, indicating that 'a real dirty joke' is being projected informs that laughter is desired in the response sequence and that it should be done on the recognition of a punchline. Mentioning the time of occurrence or reception deals with the placing of the story in some conversation, as, when the time can be seen to be between last interaction and this one the story is then warranted for telling via its status as possibly news, a status that can also be relevant to where the tellable is placed within a conversation, e.g., early in it. We say that each of these components 'can' be consequential in order to note that some might not be on any given telling occasion. For example, information with regard to the desired response may not get shown to have been attended to because information like that is not exhibited until the response sequence and that is not in a particular telling actually got to. Or, the feature having a value which is consistent with the telling, as a 'last night' reception can be, that facet is subsequently

unmentioned or alluded to and the telling is allowed without our being able to see that it is allowed in part by virtue of the mentioned reception time in particular.

Given the foregoing discussion it is easy to see how a preface sequence can come to be longer than its minimal version, the sources for its expansion initially involving uses recipients can make of the particularities of the features of the first utterance to either initially reject or otherwise delay the telling. Expanded prefaces which result in a telling are what we are here interested in developing characterizations of.

1.1 In his preface first utterance Ken combines an offer to tell, 'You wanna hear ...,' an indication of his source, '... my sister told me ...,' that a 'story' is forthcoming, and such a reference to the time of its reception, '... last night ...,' as will make the currently intended telling be seen as having been done on the first occasion he could use to tell it to these recipients. He does pack these components into an utterance whose transition occasion is indeed its first possible completion point. This latter feature of it is not however achieved in its most characteristic way, via single-sentence construction, the transition point occurring at the first possible completion of its first sentence, though it is nonetheless achieved. In part because such a construction as he does use is consistent with the proposed rule, and also because the way he proceeds recurs at preface and preface-like positions, we raise for consideration the possibility that his use of what is begun as a sentence internal correction, '... muh-eh my ...,' and is turned into a way to start a second sentence in the preface without having the first go to completion, does indeed constitute a method for satisfying the first possible completion transition use rule while building an utterance in which that does not coincide with its first sentence's first possible completion. I am suggesting that his construction can be viewed as a device whereby transition points are avoided, but not overrun, their occurrence being here and elsewhere rather delicately attended matters. While he does not use the word 'joke,' or propose that it is a dirty joke that he will be relating, that it is at least a joke that he intends to tell seems appreciated at least by Al (see line 4), and probably by Roger too (see the discussion in section 2.3). Since these appreciations might be mystifying, we note that the telling of dirty jokes has occupied a good part of the approximately twenty minutes the participants have been talking together.

1.2 Ken then stops and Roger, an intended recipient, produces an utterance that orients to the offer and permits the telling. He does this by first producing what on its own would be a rejection ('I don't wanna

hear it . . .'), then adding a counter-offer ('. . . but if you must'). A rejection alone would both register a disappreciation and have that serve, sequentially, to at least initially inhibit the telling. An acceptance alone would serve sequentially to occasion the telling while also registering an initial appreciation. With the combination he employs he can use means for registering his at least initial disappreciation without having its vehicle do its characteristic sequential job. That combination, of a rejection and a counter offer, is furthermore available, a matter indicatively suggested by recalling its use in other sorts of offer responses, as when to an invitation someone replies, 'No. I can't come over. Why don't you come here?' As each of the main sequential options to an offer carries affiliated interactional and emotional information, the rejection-counter offer combination constitutes one technique-class for separating sequential and other information. At least one technical sort of interest of the possibility may be developed. An intending teller, who can use an offer form in his prefacing utterance, can alternatively use a request form. Acceptance of a request involves a similar sequential import for the telling as acceptance of an offer, but a different interactional import; it can, for example, constitute a favor. Such a combination as Roger had done permits recipient to pick his interactional response and his sequentially consequential response separately, and thereby prevents intending teller from fully controlling both, given that both are involved in any response, by his control over the choice between using an offer or a request form. Note, in that regard, to a request, an acceptance may be done which registers more approval than the sequential job requires. To 'Would you mind . . .?' someone can reply, 'Go ahead . . .' or 'Mind? I'd love it.'

1.3 Al can take a turn specifically before Ken resumes. As an intended recipient he too may accept or reject the offer. As Roger has given permission, Al needn't talk unless inhibiting the telling is what he is interested in doing. One condition for a telling being that the intended joke or story is not already known to current recipients, an intended recipient can conditionally reject by guessing the joke or story that is to be told. Among the interests of that possibility are: if the guess is correct, it is not that the, e.g., joke goes untold, but that an intended recipient has told it, and to the intending teller who, for sure, knows it. If alternatively the guess is incorrect, its teller has nonetheless used a space another has made for a joke's telling to tell one first. Doing a guess has a basis in its use as a conditional rejection and involves the guesser in using the mentioned source to find a joke that might be the joke. But Al, while knowing of the sister – she has been mentioned in previous sessions – has never met her and couldn't tell the joke he does tell because it has been received by him

from her. Apparently he uses the mentioning of the source to employ what he knows about the sister, that she is twelve years old, to occasion telling a joke which can be delivered as a guess by being the sort of joke such persons tell. That involves his treating the mentioned source as a possible characterizer of the joke and that, as we noted, is one common component of the preface first utterance. Al then uses a place for doing rejection to produce a candidate rejection, where even if he was right about the sort of joke, that might inhibit its telling or occasion his self-congratulation after it, and also he gets a chance to deliver a joke himself, to deliver one, furthermore, that he can treat as 'not his' and if not treated as funny, not his failure. On its completion it gets no laughter, and he does indeed disaffiliate from it.

1.4 With his 'No. To stun me she says ...,' Ken closes the preface sequence and starts the telling. By setting the telling up via 'No,' he treats Al's joke under its sequentially legitimizing guise – as a guess, that status having been its basis for being told, whose failure reoccasions the originally intended telling, and now, furthermore, as a correction to Al's guess. With '... to stun me ...' Ken promises that the joke to come is of a different sort than the distinctly childish one that Al delivered as what the sister might have told. Ken has found a way to use the course of the preface sequence to strengthen his basis for the telling. What was previously deliverable by permission is now deliverable as a correction on what another has said.

## 2.0 *The telling sequence*

A joke's or a story's telling having been appropriately prefaced, its teller should proceed directly to tell it to its completion. In contrast with the organization of the preface sequence, place for the talk of recipients within the course of the telling sequence need not be provided by the teller and the telling can then take a minimal length of one teller turn.

2.1 If recipients choose to talk within the telling sequence, they may have to do their talking interruptively. For, as teller need not provide them with places, they cannot await their occurrence, and seeing no use to await such an occurrence, a basis for interrupting is given. And though they will get a chance, on its completion, by virtue of the organization of the response sequence that expectable place is not projectably usable for various of what the telling's course might involve them in being concerned to say, and in fact they do talk, and do talk interruptively, within the telling sequence. While sanctionable interruptions are located via

utterance units in process there are at least several bases for recipient talk, in stories or jokes, without occasioning the sanctioning that interruptions can otherwise legitimate. For example, a recipient can note a failure to hear some just-produced fragment or can assert the occurrence of an understandability problem. Given just the foregoing we are prepared for noticing and appreciating the orderliness of some rather fine, and not obviously related, co-occurrent features of recipient talk within the telling sequence here. The two sequences that recipients initiate in the course of the telling, i.e., lines 10ff, and lines 23ff, are both begun interruptively and both involve understanding problems. But also involve interruptions placed at points of possible transition, in constructional terms, for utterances outside of stories. We are proposing that an observable conjunction in these particular materials which does not involve obviously related matters is *uncoincidental*. The conjunction is between that the talk is interruptive, that it is placed very close to points of possible transition in non-story constructional terms, and that the talk's business concerns understanding problems. That conjunction has a basis which is, again, that provision for the talk of recipients need not be provided by the teller, and, alternatively, that recipients are allowed to find things to say within the telling sequence (one group of those things to say involving understanding problems). Having been thus provided with basis for talking which will need to be done interruptively, positioning it with a formal attention to generally usable transition points, makes its intended lawfulness as visible as is consistent with its interruptive status. Note that the foregoing account required no reference to the fact that a joke, or a dirty joke, was being told. It used only that something built in the form of a story was being told.

2.2 By introducing some considerations specific to the telling sequence for jokes (built in the form of a story) we can further extend the observable orderlinesses of the materials we are examining.

Since responses to stories require an understanding of them and can reveal the failure thereof, a recipient who feels a failure in the story's course and can intrude to seek clarification is motivated to do so because he can thereby be aided in avoiding a misresponse. No special motive for raising a failure beyond its occurrence need be had where stories are concerned, for failures to hear or understand have such a potential consequentiality. For jokes, however, one needn't remedy failures of understanding in order to respond appropriately since there is available a general way to appropriately respond which can be used whether one understands or not, i.e., laughter produced at the recognized completion. One's failures of understanding are concealable. Furthermore, for jokes and dirty jokes in particular, but not for stories generally, there are grounds for avoiding the

assertion of occurred understanding failures. Jokes, and dirty jokes in particular, are constructed as 'understanding tests.' Not everyone supposedly 'gets' each joke, the getting involving achievement of its understanding, a failure to get being supposable as involving a failure to understand. Asserting understanding failures can then reveal, e.g., recipients' lack of sophistication, a matter that an appropriately placed laugh can otherwise conceal. For jokes, and dirty jokes in particular then, the assertion of understanding failures, while legitimate, is expectably more restricted than for stories otherwise, and the assertion is distinctly of interest beyond being an index of the presence of non-understandings.

The foregoing locates a particular class of understanding failures as eligible for use where jokes or dirty jokes are being told. They are such as claim that a located failure implicates some defect of the joke or its telling. If such a claim can be developed by a recipient the talking that understanding failures allow within the course of a telling can be done; can be done without the failure implicating recipients' supposable sophistication in a negative way; can indeed be used, by requiring teller to venture a clarification of what he may only know by rote, to cause teller to himself become the subject of the understanding test he seemed to be administering, and can thereby constitute one best way of both legitimizing a disappreciation of the joke and lawfully heckling the telling. We are suggesting that the failures of understanding asserted, interruptively, by these recipients of the joke's telling are of just that sort, and we shall now attempt to explicate their sources in the joke telling, hoping thereby to locate the defects which recipients grasped.

2.3 Before doing that, however, let us attend to some ways in which the fact that the joke is dirty figures in the recipient talk. Both sequences, the first involving the possible implication that the girls got married to each other and the second that the sisters married their own brothers, involve drawing specifically obscene implications, ones which happen to be unintended by the teller, where: attending to obscene implications of not necessarily obscene matters constitutes one specifically appropriate procedure for listening to get a dirty joke in its course of presentation. These understandings then are consistent with such a sort of search for obscenity as recipients of a dirty joke are properly occupied with.

2.4 By treating 'just got married' in a usual sense, as involving that the subjects of that predicate married each other, Roger makes available for notice what he can then, by virtue of that being at least illegal, make cause for wonder. While Roger's 'understanding' is surely feigned, it does involve the sort of option that jokes are made with, as the following quote (in which the option, though intended, is not taken up) evidences:

'My friend's 90 years old widower father is still pretty spry and also a fast thinker in a crisis. He proved this recently to a slightly younger widow who was a matrimonial activist. Striking suddenly one evening, she said to him, "Don't you think we should get married?"

"“Why, yes,” the old man parried, as his head ducked the noose, “but who would have us?””<sup>4</sup>

Turning then to lines 23ff, Al appears also to have ignored a restriction on the application of a possible interpretation. We consider this one a bit more fully because, in another publication (Sacks 1972), we developed rules which apply to just such materials and which make the method of Al's inference technically available. We proposed there that there is a class of category collections, of which the collection 'family,' which includes such categories as 'mother,' 'father,' 'sister,' 'brother,' etc., is a prototype. If categories from such a collection are being used to refer to some group of more than one person, the basic interpretational rule is: treat the set of persons so referred to as co-incumbents of one unit *if one can*. Having applied the rule, and ignored the latter restriction, Al can propose to have heard the 'brothers' and 'sisters' to be in one family, and thereby to have located a possible obscenity the joke did not intend or a failure of knowledge of its 'designer, the failure involving, of course, not knowing that brothers can't marry their own sisters, though that fact could perfectly well have served him as grounds for seeing the relevance of the restriction the rule contains.

We have now come to some ways in which the fact that this is a joke that is being told figures in the course of its telling and that it is a dirty joke also figures. We have also come to see that the interruptive utterances of recipients are methodic, and that quite fine-feature co-occurrences can be made observable and subject to structural explication. We have further come to see that there are quite different ways that the statuses 'built in the form of a story,' 'joke,' 'dirty joke' figure. All of the foregoing has been done, finally, with attention being directed almost exclusively to the organization of the telling in conversation, not (yet) to that of the joke itself.

### 3.0 *The response sequence*

A joke-telling sequence's completion, intendedly accomplished by its punch-line, occasions its response sequence. In minimal courses that consists wholly of laughings. As each recipient may laugh, and as laughings are a prime exception to the 'no more than one at a time' speaker turn-taking rule for conversation, the laughings can overlap. In minimal courses the joke response sequence consists wholly of laughings that partially overlap.

Laughings, which for conversation generally are competitive with talking

at the points where the former might be done, have a priority claim on a joke's completion. But each recipient is not obliged to laugh. Each who chooses not to can orient to its priority status by being silent in favor of those who might choose to. Consequently, delayed laughings and silence too are systematic possibilities on joke completions. But the conversation system is designed to minimize gaps and silences. Consequently, where they are systematically possible the system contains techniques which encourage gap minimization and which provide remedies for silences. There is a group of such techniques available for use at the joke response sequence position in particular. Their use organizes the talk that composes expanded response sequences for jokes. That being so, an at least initial technical interest in expanded response sequences for jokes is in their evidencing that facet of what we can intend by 'organized' which involves that even for 'second order' structural problems there are structural solutions. That is, the possible use of less than minimal responses leaves a potential gap; the existence of that potential gap poses a turn organizational problem for whose reduction there are solutions; those solutions inhibit the use of one apparent alternative to a minimal response, i.e., no response and encourage another alternative, i.e., an expanded response sequence. That turns out to be the alternative to a minimal response sequence by virtue of the intrusion of relevance of turn organizational considerations which the possibility of no responses poses because it yields a silence.

3.1 In order to set up the sorts of expansions joke response sequences can take we proceed first to show how delayed recipient laughter and silence are distinctively systematic possibilities on joke completions.

For conversation generally, at the points at which laughing might be done by current non-speakers it is competitive with the possibility of talk by them or others. Since laughings are responsive, potential laughers will be concerned to have their laugh locate what it is responsive to. And since laughings are very locally responsive – if done on the completion of some utterance they affiliate to last utterance and if done within some utterance they affiliate to its current state of development – the concern to have one's potential laugh locate what it is intendedly responsive to requires that it be done as rapidly as possible. For delay, allowing other talk to intervene between a laugh and its target talk, can have the result that the laugh will be heard as aimed at other than what it is intended to respond to, and not as a response that happens to be more or less delayed to some locatable prior event. It is in that sense that for conversation generally, i.e., without specification of the particular sorts of loci involved, delayed laughing is not a systematic projectable possibility.

Jokes are special occasions for laughings in that laughings have a priority

claim on a joke's completion. Though each recipient is not obliged to, any recipient may laugh. Each who chooses not to can orient to its priority claim by not taking a first opportunity to talk (the joke completion, being a point of transition, is such an opportunity), by being silent in favor of those who might choose to laugh. Since each recipient is not obliged to laugh, any can choose not to without causing no laughter to be a consequence, except of course in two-party conversation. That makes two-party conversation joke telling a very different situation than where more than two are involved. For reasons such as this we are specifically not considering joke telling in two-party conversation in this paper.

Each and therefore all recipients declining to laugh on its first possibility, on the joke's intended completion, and all who decline to laugh also declining to talk, a second chance for laughings that are delayed occurs before talk breaches a developing silence. Alternatively, any who decline to laugh can have a chance for laughing delayedly, and before talk, if any choose to laugh. For, as one's laughing does not exclude others', any who have not taken a first opportunity to laugh can, another having started a laugh, produce a delayed laugh that joins, overlaps the latter's.

Whereas then for conversation generally potential laughers are motivated to laugh as soon as possible, the situation of jokes making provision for a chance to laugh with delay, potential laughers can wait, to see, for example, whether others do, before starting or choosing not to. Delayed laughs can both precede talk and locate that it is the joke they follow that they are responsive to. Delayed laughing being possible, each might also choose not to laugh delayedly and there is then a systematic possibility of gaps or silences, the orientation to laughing's priority claim being satisfied by not talking if not laughing.

3.2 If gaps or silences are systematically possible, that structural fact is itself significant. For, to repeat, this conversation system is designed to minimize gaps and silences. It is then expectable that where those possibilities are structural, there will be means for discouraging their happening, for encouraging laughings when they are priority items, and for encouraging their non-delayed production. We shall consider those means now, develop some limits to their operation, and then proceed to consider the import of another mechanism which operates at those limits.

The means for encouraging laughing, and for encouraging its non-delayed production, while surely familiar, seem unnamed and not functionally appreciated. Our name for them is 'the recipient comparative wit assessment device.' The device's operation has its base in the following: given a potential gap between a punchline's completion and the start of recipient laughings, and given that recipient laughings may overlap, reci-

ipient laughs are potentially differentiable in terms of their relative starts. If relative starts are then oriented to, they can provide materials with which to comparatively assess recipients. And recipients themselves orienting to this potential use of their relative laugh starts, are then encouraged to laugh as soon as possible, to try to be first, and therefore to attempt to laugh before it can be seen whether others will laugh at all. (Recall: jokes and dirty jokes in particular are used as 'understanding tests.')

The power of this device is that it encourages recipients to try to laugh before they have seen whether others will, and once any recipient has laughed whether on those grounds or others, each other recipient is thereby also encouraged to laugh as soon as he can.

There is then a mechanism which encourages non-delay of laughings on joke completions, and, laughings occurring, encourages other recipients to laugh as soon as any have begun. However, the mechanism not being readily applicable if none laugh allows each to delay to see if others will, where it is at all possible that none might. And such an initial delay being usable, an encouragement for its use resides in that not only does none laughing undercut the recipient wit comparative assessment device, it also permits the non-laughing's concertedness to be used to negatively grade the joke or its telling.

The success of a decision not to laugh in setting up its use to negatively grade a joke telling turns then on that decision being arrived at by the set of recipients, where each is subject to individual pressure to laugh before that possibility can be checked out, and thereby to undercut the possibility. The choice to laugh or not to laugh is not free, nor consequential independently of what others do, which can be inaccessible when the choice is at hand. But if all do not laugh then a different assessment is possible from the one that can be made if various recipients laugh with differentiated starts. If the set of recipients laugh rapidly and overlappingly their responses will not be graded negatively, nor will the joke be. If, however, the set of recipients do achieve non-laughing then the silence that ensues arms them with materials of talk with which to either respond to the telling or to a critique that the teller might develop, responding to their non-response. This situation for jokes seems a specification of what is a general technique for dealing with silence's occurrence in conversation. That is, generally, silence can be handled by turning the silence into a topic or by turning into a topic the preceding utterance or sequence by way of that feature of it that it produced a silence.

In summary then, the comparative wit device can serve, via its potential use to encourage laughings quickly, blindly, or on some laugh start, or, delay having occurred for laugh starts or for some laugh's start relative to others, to occasion talk about the relative wit of recipients. The joke grading

device can serve, via its potential use to encourage delay, or, delay by each yielding the observability of the fact that none may laugh, and none then choosing to laugh, to occasion talk directed to grading the joke and teller's wit negatively.

The foregoing locates and leaves us with a range of potential problems that response sequences can engender for participants, and we turn our attention to the instant response sequence for its bearing on these matters, for what it can teach us.

3.3 While the instant response sequence does contain laughs, there are sufficient aberrancies to those laughs to make the fact that it contains talk assessing the laughs and the telling altogether expectable. Such aberrancies as the following may be noted: the first two laughs do not overlap, are separated by a gap; the teller and not a recipient laughs first, and not on completion but after a gap; both teller's first laugh and recipient's subsequent first laugh are mirthless, and brief.

Section 3.2 left us with no alternative first move to laughter in the response sequence, though it suggested that a concerted absence of recipient laughter was possible via each recipient's use of a potential delay to check whether others would laugh. While this choice would expectably yield talk directed to its assessment, it was left unexamined how that talk might get started, in the face of the priority to laughter yielding silence if not laughter. Here we consider materials which bear on that issue. Mirthless laughter, which here constitutes the first production, by both teller and a recipient, seems a particularly interesting object. Why, if laughter be mirthless, is it done at all? And how does it shape the course of talk which succeeds its occurrence?

In pursuit of accounting for the occurrence of mirthless laughter, the argument of section 1.2 seems relevant. A mirthless laugh perhaps constitutes a way to produce a sequentially appropriate object, where that object is laughter, while stripping it of much of the rest of what laughter otherwise carries, emotionally and interactionally. While it is certainly of interest that such stripped-down laughing is done, our concern now is with some problems its use solves, and with some its delayed, teller-begun, non-overlapped mirthlessness pose.

Ignoring the teller's laugh for the moment, a delayed recipient laugh that is mirthless, or, as here, specifically mocking (as our transcript attempts to indicate that Al's is), can serve to occasion transition to talk that assesses the telling, without having the fact that some recipient laughed served to make that laugh's delay or the non-laughing of others set up the use of the comparative wit assessment device. Al's delayed and mocking laughter as an only recipient laugh can then constitute means for arriving at response

sequence talk without giving materials which could be used to have that laugh serve to aid a possible defense of the joke and critique of the recipients' wit.

Recipient use of such a laugh has a further safety to it in that besides being a first and delayed recipient laugh, it follows teller's mirthless laugh, teller's mirthlessness suggesting that teller might well be not intending to defend the joke's funniness. If then Al's laugh's mirthlessness gains some assurance of its safety from Ken's laugh's mirthlessness, what might be sources for Ken's laugh having gone first and been mirthless?

Recalling, again, that the conversation system is designed to minimize gaps, we may note: whenever a party's utterance is such as to have particular sorts of nexts appropriate on its completion there are means available to such a party for post-indicating completion's occurrence, it having occurred to teller's satisfaction and both no such subsequent and silence having ensued. He can repeat the utterance or its completion or he may offer a candidate response himself, as in the case of questions the questioner may follow a pause after his intended completion with a candidate, guessed answer ('Why did you do it?' [pause] 'Because of her?'). Were such a possibility to apply to jokes too, there is then a basis for Ken laughing first if, as here, his laugh succeeds not his completion but a gap after his completion. Having got an understanding of why Al's – a recipient's – laughing can be done while being done mirthlessly, we turn to consider why Ken, the teller, might produce a mirthless laugh, it being unpuzzling for him to laugh mirthfully.

A mirthful laugh would claim the joke's funniness, propose an intention to defend its funniness. If recipients expectably feel otherwise, such a defense will involve an argument ensuing. For such an argument's strength, from teller's perspective, recipient laughing is surely relevant. For such an argument's strength then, teller's best position would involve his being second laugher, joining any first recipient laughter. Here, not only has that not occurred, but Ken has been throughout apprised of recipient disappreciation of the joke's telling. A mirthless laugh on his part can then suggest that he is prepared to leave the joke's funniness unargued, whereas we shall, shortly, see that a defense of the telling can nonetheless be ventured by him. His laugh, occasioned by the gap on his completion, can then launch the response sequence without committing him to a defense of the joke's funniness, as Al's does not weaken recipient's potential critique of its funniness.

The question we are now faced with, consideration of which will close our consideration of the joke's telling, is: does a teller have means for defending a joke's telling if he concedes its unfunniness, if, that is, he does not attempt

to attack the absence of (mirthful, undelayed, overlapping) recipient laughter? Our materials are again useful on this score.

If Ken or any teller concedes his joke's unfunny, allows the appropriateness of no or mocking laughter by recipients, how can the telling, which in the first instance is warranted by the joke's supposable funniness, be defended? One such procedure has already appeared and been briefly noted in section 1.3. Al's joke, lines 4–5, having been delivered in a position which would involve it being legitimately done if as a guess, and having been, subsequent to its telling, proposed by him to be Ken's sister's joke, was delivered in a way that contained defenses against having its unfunny to this audience serve as a negative reflection of Al's wit though he was indeed the local teller. Thus, a joke inserted into a preface sequence by an intended recipient can be warranted for its telling apart from claims to its funniness. While such a procedure, which involves attributing a bad joke to someone else, will not suffice for a joke told by the intending teller within the telling sequence, attribution is potentially usable, given that jokes and this joke are commonly accompanied by an indication of whom the current teller received them from, that feature providing the makings of an attributive transformation of the telling, by the teller.

Recalling our early observation that jokes built in the form of stories are told with the use of the organizational techniques used for stories, that fact, in combination with the fact that the sister has been mentioned as a source, provides the basic resources for developing a legitimation of the telling. A story can have its telling warranted by virtue of the surprise its events involved or the surprising news its teller learned from them that he can figure his recipients do not yet know. While such a story point can be introduced in its preface, means for introducing it after the story's apparent completion are available. (Note that while Ken did not provide such materials in his preface, his preface revision, line 6, did include a possible such characterization, '...To stun me...') And a perfectly usual instance is indeed used here on Ken's behalf by Al. 'What he meant to say is . . . , ' line 61, which Ken agrees to the use of, line 66, and then uses to attach a story point to his telling, line 68, turning it, or claiming that its import all along was as a report of something surprising about his sister which he learned and which the joke's telling to him by her teaches.<sup>5</sup>