

The role of listenership in the coproduction of a conversation: Focusing on the contribution of laughter in Japanese interaction*

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Abstract. This paper discovers the patterns and communicative functions of laughter as displays of listenership in Japanese conversational interactions. For this purpose, I discuss both general and deviant cases of laughter by focusing on the role of listeners and subsequently show how such patterns and functions could contribute to creating, enhancing, and maintaining mutual relations in an ongoing interactional process. Based on the findings, this study further suggests that three significant aspects, conversational roles, social roles, and shifting conversation, are tightly intertwined to achieve the coproduction of ongoing interactions. Finally, this study indicates that listenership activities through laughter can dynamically work as a bridge to facilitate such coproduction, which is embedded in each conversational context.

Keywords: listenership, laughter, coproduction of a conversation, Japanese interaction, discourse analysis

1 Introduction

Traditional studies on discourse analysis have focused on a speaker's activity; however, they have paid little attention to the contributions made by a listener, in particular, the relationship between listenership (or the listener's contribution) and laughter in a spoken interaction. One of the key elements in exploring the role of a listener is the coproduction of conversation. In addition, seeking the status of a listener is important in the Japanese communicational style, as it is based on the "listener-based mode" (Yamada, 1997: 38). Against these backgrounds, this study investigates the following factors: how the coproduction through laughter as a display of listenership can be achieved, and how this association relates to the Japanese communication style. Therefore, this study aims to discover patterns and functions of laughter as displays of listenership in Japanese conversational interaction in order to clarify how they can contribute to the creation, enhancement, and maintenance of mutual relations in an ongoing interactional process and explore some implications as to how listenership activities through laughter can dynamically work to facilitate such coproduction in Japanese interaction.

2 Previous studies

In this section, I overview the existing literature on listening and laughter activities and set up the basis for the current analysis.

2.1 The role of a listener

Recent studies on discourse have started dealing with a listener's contribution, whereas the status of a speaker was the main focus of older studies (Goffman, 1981; Tannen, 1989;

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Goodwin, 1986). Tannen (1989) suggested that the hearing and understanding activities of a listener “are dialogic acts because they require active interpretation, not passive reception” (100). In contrast to the traditional view, this quotation suggests that the listener actively participates in the ongoing interaction.

Moreover, according to Goffman (1981), listeners are divided into three types. The first type of listeners comprises those who overhear, second refers to those who are ratified participants but not specifically addressed by the speaker, and third comprises the ratified participants who are addressed by the speaker. This study considers, in particular, the third type of listeners because two participants interact with one another in the current data collection, and they are ratified participants.

Next, a certain process is required to fulfill the listener’s role in an ongoing interaction. Conversation is considered as a coproduction done by both a speaker and listener; in fact, Clark (1996) characterizes it as a “joint action.” The following three steps specify how the listener plays a role in achieving this coproduction. First, he or she signals to reveal his or her role in the coproduction through both verbal and nonverbal channels, such as verbal back channels, nodding, laughter, and smiling. Second, such signals show communicative functions, for example, agreement, disagreement, and acknowledgment. Third, mutual responding engagement occurs based on these signals and communicative functions. The speaker talks first, to which the listener responds. Subsequently, the first speaker gives a feedback, and such an engagement is the coproduction of a conversation. Based on these clarifications of the listener’s role, this study defines listenership as “a fundamental contribution by the listening side to the co-production of [a] conversation” (Namba, 2011: 3).

2.2 The Japanese communicational style and identity

The significance of listenership can be understood in terms of cultural specifics and communicational styles. For instance, the Japanese style is characterized by the “listener-based mode” (Yamada, 1997: 38). In Japanese interaction, it is suggested that guesswork, which indicates “a strategy where players try to understand as much as possible from the little that is said” (Yamada, 1997: 37), has a solid connection with listenership. Further, Yamada (1997) emphasizes the status of a listener in Japanese communication as follows: “[f]or the Japanese, the responsibility of communication rests with the audience, making listener interpretation not only key, but the main mode of communication” (38). Due to such characteristics, Japanese communication is referred to as “listener talk” (Yamada, 1997: 38). It is universally acknowledged that the status of a speaker is more significant than that of a listener. However, all the aforementioned characteristics indicate that the contributions of the listener toward achieving the coproduction of a conversation are indispensable in Japanese communication.

2.3 Laughter

Initially, scholars investigating laughter paid attention to its causes, such as the “incongruity theory” (Schopenhauer, 1886). In recent years, the focus has gradually shifted to the interactional aspects of laughter in real communication. The first approach was based on conversational joking, and it revealed the two distinct functions “bonding” and “biting” (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997). The second approach refers to taking a look at laughter itself, in particular, its interactional patterns (Jefferson, 1979; 1984; Glenn, 2003; 2010; Holt, 2010). Moreover, the functions of laughter were revealed; one of the positive functions was “affiliation,” according to which “the hearer displays support of and endorses the teller’s conveyed stance” (Stivers, 2008: 35). Further, Partington (2006) suggests that “[a]ffiliation can create the group-bonding effects of shared laughter” (18). Hence, such an affiliative function of laughter can build solidarity among participants.

In order to define laughter, one must understand the types of features involved in it. According to Laver and Hutchenson (1972), laughter is categorized as having vocal nonverbal features. They specified three types of features related to verbal and nonverbal behaviors: vocal

and verbal, vocal nonverbal, and nonvocal nonverbal features. A typical example of the first type is back channels (e.g., “uh huh”), which are spoken words as linguistic units. The second type, vocal nonverbal features, contains intonation, spoken emphasis and units. Laughter exemplifies this type. On the other hand, an example of a nonvocal nonverbal feature is nodding and facial expressions, which has neither vocal sounds nor actual meaning. In addition to this feature, Glenn (2010) suggests that “laughter is perceived both audibly and visually” (1499). According to him (Glenn, 2010), “(l)laughter is a phenomenon that combines different kinds of modalities: vocal (the production of laugh tokens or particles), facial expression (e.g. smiling) and body movement (e.g. the shaking of the torso)” (1499). Certainly, laughter involves such diverse features embedded in real communication. In this sense, laughter can be sought within a much more dynamic process.

3 Methods

In this section, I explain the data¹ used and analytical method followed for the current analysis.

3.1 Data

This study used 135 minutes of videotaped set-tasks, which were collected from Japan Women’s University, Tokyo, in 2004. In this data collection, 23 Japanese female dyads participated. All the participants were native Japanese speakers living around Tokyo, and they talked for 5-15 minutes on a surprising event. There were two types of dyads: (1) two university students who were friends (11 dyads), and (2) a teacher and university student (12 dyads).

3.2 Analytical method

The analysis followed a twofold approach: general and deviant cases. The general case sheds light on the basic structures and functions of laughter in terms of the display of listenership by drawing on the structure of laughter (Jefferson, 1979). The structure of laughter consists of “invitation” from the speaker’s side and “acceptance” or “declination” from the listener’s side. “Invitation” is related to a speaker’s action; as explained by Jefferson (1979), the “speaker himself indicates that laughter is appropriate, by himself laughing, and recipient thereupon laughs” (80). In addition, it is noted that “both laughables and laughter, singly or in combination, may invite laughter” (Jefferson, 1974; qtd. in Glenn, 2003: 81). The term “laughables” indicates that the “the occurrence of laughter marks its referent (usually retrospectively) as laughable—and, potentially, as humorous” (Glenn, 2003: 33). In this sense, laughables and laughter are inseparable and, hence, the invitation of laughter is done with these effects. In response to the speaker’s invitation, a listener might react in specific ways, which are called “acceptance” and “declination” (Jefferson, 1979). In acceptance, the listener laughs following the invitation by the speaker to display “responsiveness and mutual ratification of a comic or lucid frame” (Glenn, 2003: 54). On the other hand, “declination” occurs when the listener does not laugh following the speaker’s invitation, as Glenn (2003) points out that listeners may pursue non-laughing topical matters at the moment when the speaker invited laughter. In this manner, this study explores the general patterns and functions of laughter in Japanese interaction by following the structure of laughter. However, on analyzing closely, there should be a deviant case beyond the aforementioned general cases; therefore, the latter part of the current analysis considers such a case.

4 Findings

¹ The data used in this study were collected as part of a project (No. 15320054) funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

The findings of this study are mainly divided into two parts, general and deviant, as I mentioned in the previous section. In general cases, I clarify two patterns of laughter under the laughter structure: Initiation of the 1) speaker's laughter and 2) listener's laughter. Subsequently, I discuss the deviant case, which is not dealt with by the structure of laughter.

When discussing the patterns of laughter, I will begin by locating certain characteristics of the speaker's invitation and listener's laughter. The data reveal that the invitation of laughter by the speaker is achieved in three ways, 1) laughter plus laughables, 2) laughter, and 3) laughables, whereas the listener's laughter following the invitation occurs in two ways, 1) laughter and 2) laughter plus verbal utterances.

4.1 General cases

Based on the characteristics mentioned in the previous section, I discuss the basic patterns of laughter under the structures of invitation and acceptance. First, I consider the initiation of a speaker's laughter. In this manner, initially, the speaker's laughter appears and, then, the listener laughs in acceptance. In the following extract, a Teacher (T) tells her Student (S) of a surprising event in her daily life:

(1) The initiation of speaker's laughter: Onomatopoeia plus repetition

1T: *DEE uchi shujin gaa anou shinai o motteita n de[kendou no[shinai o mottetan dee²*

“AND my husband, uhm, had a bamboo sword for playing *kendo*, so”

2S: [hai [hai

“yes yes”

3T: *sore(h)o da(h)shite kite*

“(he) brou(h)ght i(h)t and,”

4T: *TSUN[tsu(h)n tte tsuite tsu huhu*

→ “(he) picked the person with it like ‘TSUN ts(h)un,’” ((onomatopoeia))³

5S: [tsu(h)n tsun HUHAHAHAHA

→ “tsu(h)n tsun HUHAHAHAHAHA”

6T: *sumimasen okite kudasai[te hh i(h)ttan desu(h)[ke(h)do(h), huhu*

“(he) said ‘excuse me, please wake up’ thou(h)gh huhuhu ”

7S: [huhuh [hai

“huhuh yes”

T initiates laughter (line 4), and S laughs in response (line 5). In addition to laughter, T uses onomatopoeia as a form of quoting (line 4). This linguistic signal works by recognizing a laughable, and I call such signals “occasions.” Quotations, repetitions, a change of voice, laugh particle, and surprise evaluations are some examples of occasions. In response to the onomatopoeia, S reflects on it and repeats it in the following line (line 5). In this sense, the onomatopoeia “*tsun tsun*” functions as an occasion. The key point is that S immediately laughs on hearing the previous onomatopoeia and laughter in T's utterance. In this manner, T initiates

² The transcription convention is noted as follows:

A: code for name of speaker	[: the point where overlapping talk starts
]: the point where overlapping talk ends	Capital letter: emphasizing
<u>Underlining</u> : highlighting parts produced in a louder or more emphatic tone than surrounding talk	
(()): commentary by transcriptionist	::: sound stretch, e.g., Ah :::
=: “latching” or contiguous talk, i.e., there is no pause after the completion of one utterance and beginning of another	(.): unmeasured micropause
-: cut-off	,: continuing intonation
↑: rising intonation of the sound that it precedes	.: (full stop) falling intonation
(.7): the number indicates the length of a pause or silence measured in seconds	
° °: portions that are delivered in a quieter voice than surrounding talk are enclosed between degree signs	
·hh: inbreathing or inhalation, possibly laughter	h: (or (h)) aspiration, breathiness, possibly laughter

³ This onomatopoeia expresses his way of picking a person, with a gesture.

laughter as the invitation through laughter and the onomatopoeia as an occasion and, subsequently, S accepts the invitation by laughing and repeating the occasion.

In contrast, the initiation of laughter occurs through not only the speaker but also the listener. In the following extract, Teacher (T) is a speaker, and Student (S) is a listener:

(2) The initiation of laughter by the listener (onomatopoeia)

((T tells a surprising event, in which a pigeon frequently came to the balcony of her flat and scared her.))

1T: *tokoro ga, kono mae no nichiyoubi wa =*

“but, on the last Sunday,”

2S: *=hai*

“yes”

3T: *nanka beranda no doa o aketera =*

“like, when (I) opened the door of a veranda,”

4S: *=hai =*

“yes”

5T: *=totsuzen batabatabataba [tatte*

→ “it was suddenly, like ‘batabatabata’ and,”

6S: *[HEHEHEHE hai*

→ “HEHEHEHE yes”

7T: *hato[ga, nanka beranda no oku no hou ni itarashii hato ga*

“a pigeon which was in the back of the veranda,”

8S: *[ettu, ettu, a, haa, hai=*

“oh oh, yes”

T uses onomatopoeia in the form of a quotation while describing the behavior of a pigeon (line 5), and S immediately reacts with laughter and a back channel (line 6). This exchange shows that laughter is absent in T’s utterance, whereas S initiates laughter. However, S’s laughter overwraps the previous production of T, precisely following the previous onomatopoeia as an occasion. This suggests that T invites laughter with such an occasion and S accepts it by initiating laughter.

In general cases, the existence of an occasion is rigidly connected to the invitation of laughter and a listener’s accepting laughter. However, sometimes, the listener reacts with laughter by appreciating the previous speaker’s production even when it has no occasion:

(3) Listener’s initiation of laughter (without occasions)

((T is in the middle of telling a story. She tells a surprising event that a pigeon frequently came to her balcony and scared her a bit.))

1T: *anou(.)nanka kou(.)chotto shiawasena [kimochi ni mo narushii,*

“uhm (.) like this (.) (I) feel happy, a bit and,”

2S: *[aa(h)aa(h)ha(h)i*

→ “rig(h)ht rig(h)ht ye(h)s” ((T’s story continues.))

T is in the middle of telling her surprise (line 1), and S immediately reacts with laughter and back channels (line 2). In contrast to the previous extracts, there is no occasion, such as a quotation, repetition, or change of voice, in T’s production. At the same time, the lack of such an occasion indicates that it is not easy to locate a laughable in such a production. On the other hand, S’s immediate reaction, however, is motivated by the previous production and expresses her appreciation of the production. This listener’s reaction suggests that she actively and creatively participates in the ongoing interaction without any cue from the speaker side, and she discovers her positive involvement.

The listener does not always react with laughter; when such laughter is absent, it is called “declination” (Jefferson, 1979). It is suggested that the listener needs to actively decline the

invitation. For example, a couple of pauses and a silence mean that there is a gap in the listener's response and that the listener is declining the invitation to laugh. However, in the Japanese data analyzed in this study, such a case was rare, even though the listeners' laughter was sometimes absent. Instead, their smiles and verbal acknowledgments were found to fill this absence. In this study, such a case is called "ambivalence," which is the third option after declination and acceptance. In the following extract, Student (S) is in the middle of telling a surprising event, and Teacher (T) is listening to S:

(4) Ambivalence

1S: @*de okitara a yabai mi*[*taina*

"and when (I) woke up, (I found), like 'oh my God',"

2T: [aa

"right"

3S: *nanka*@ *su(h)goi bikkuri* [*toka(h)tte dou desu ka*

→ "like (I thought) '(it's)' really surprising,' how about (this surprise)?"

4T: [@*sou desu yo ne, tashi ka ni bikkuri tte no waa*,⁴

"that's right, probably a surprise means"

5 *bikkuritte sono shunkan* [*teki na koto dakara*@

"that moment in which something happened, so,"

6S: [@*aa, aa, aa, aa, hai*@ =

"right right right right yes"

7T: = @*sou desu yo ne a*[*a arimasu arimasu*@

"that's right oh I have (the same experience), I have"

At the end of S's telling, she evaluates that her telling was surprising by initiating laughter (line 3), to which T reacts with an acknowledgment (lines 4 and 7), understanding (line 5), and a smile (lines 4 to 7), although laughter is absent. T's reaction overlaps with S's previous production, which suggests that such a reaction is strongly motivated by the previous one, in particular, S's evaluation that her telling was surprising. In addition, in her reaction, laughter is absent; however, she fills the absence of laughter through ambivalent reactions, that is, smiles and a couple of acknowledgment and understanding markers, which function as an indirect reaction. In a sense, such ambivalent reactions can avoid awkward situations and help to maintain smooth communication among participants.

4.2 The deviant case

In the course of an ongoing interaction, conversational contexts and roles do not always remain fixed; rather, they are dynamic and shift frequently. Laughter as a display of listenership plays a key role in facilitating such flexible and dynamic shifts. In the following extract, two students, R and L, are talking about a surprising event. R is facing an awkward situation because she has no surprise to tell. She finally manages to find one and tell it to L; however, L mocks R because the latter is telling a poor surprise:

(5) The shift from an awkward situation to humor

1R: = *EE*:: *bikkuri shita koto da yo ne*(1.0)uuuun(.)

[to ne,

"uhm, (we) talk about a surprise, right? (1.0) uhm"

2L: [^o*ita*^o ((L bangs her leg on the chair))

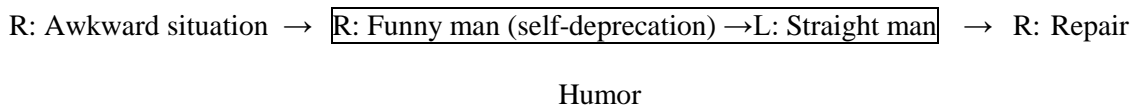
"ouch"

⁴ The bold characters indicate that the listener uses ambivalent reactions, which contain smiles and acknowledgments without laughter.

- 3R: *nanka(0.8)jimoto no kooen ni:.(.)karasu ga*
 “like (0.8) in the local park (.)”
- 4 *tairyoo hassei shiteru(0.5)koto(.)gurai*
 “lots of crows appear (0.5), that’s (.) just,”
- 5 *ka(h)na(.)[bikkuri shiteru no ttehh*
 → my surprise, may(.)be hhh”
- 6L: [hhhh °*bikkuri shita[yo° sore BIKKURI nano ka yo*
 → “hhhh (I)’m surprised, is that (your) SURPRISE?!”
- 7R: [°*chigau no(.)@*
 “no (.)”
- 8 *nanka:: bikkuri nan da yo nanka ne(.)hisashiburi ni(0.9)*
 “like (this) is a surprise, listen (.) after a long time,”

In this extract, pauses (line 1) suggest that R is facing an awkward situation. When she finally manages to mention her surprise, a couple of pauses show that she is still facing the awkward situation (lines 3 to 5) by emphasizing that her surprise is trivial (lines 4 and 5). Laughter happens at the end (line 5), and R reacts with laughter, as well (line 6). As explained earlier, R is in an awkward situation, and laughter should be rigidly connected to the situation. Subsequently, she deprecates herself in such a situation by laughing because she has no good surprise to tell. On the other hand, L’s subsequent laughter obviously follows R’s previous laughter. Moreover, L immediately repeats (line 6) R’s previous evaluative comment, “*bikkuri*” (surprising), regarding what she experienced (line 5). This shows that the evaluation works as an occasion. In addition, there is some humorous exchange between R and L (lines 5 and 6). R treated her surprise as trivial in an awkward situation. L’s reaction, “*sore BIKKURI nano ka yo*” (is that (your) SURPRISE?!), is teasing, and she is playing the role of a straight man under a humorous context. Following L’s sharp reaction, R begins to repair her surprising experience (from line 7). There is some shift in conversational flow between R and L, as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1. The ongoing conversational flow



The conversation began under an awkward situation with the accompaniment of frequent pauses, as R had no surprise to tell (which is depicted on the left side of Figure 1). Subsequently, R deprecates herself by showing that she has only a trivial surprise to tell, to which L reacted sharply by mocking R. Moreover, both R and L fulfill not only their conversational role, of the teller and listener, but also their humorous role, which suddenly became embedded in this conversational flow by playing R’s funny man and L’s straight man⁵. In addition, this humorous exchange suggests that such an improvised role-play is negotiated through a flexible and dynamic ongoing interaction.

With respect to the role of a listener, L displays her listenership by mocking R through her sharp reaction and laughter (line 6). The current data reveal that the majority of the study participants who played a listening role displayed their understanding and acknowledgment toward the speaker through laughter, smiles, and various back channels. However, the above example showed another possibility, where the listener mocked her partner that fitted in well with the ongoing conversational flow. In other words, it was observed that such an improvised reaction was possible and even appreciated because the speaker and listener were friends. The listener’s reaction suggests that she shares a strong and close relationship with the speaker, and

⁵ Oshima reveals this role-play as follows: “Japanese people are highly aware of the roles they are playing in humorous communication” (2006: 105).

they each play their distinct roles, of funny man and straight man, at the same time, which exemplifies their solidarity.

5 The functions of laughter as a display of listenership

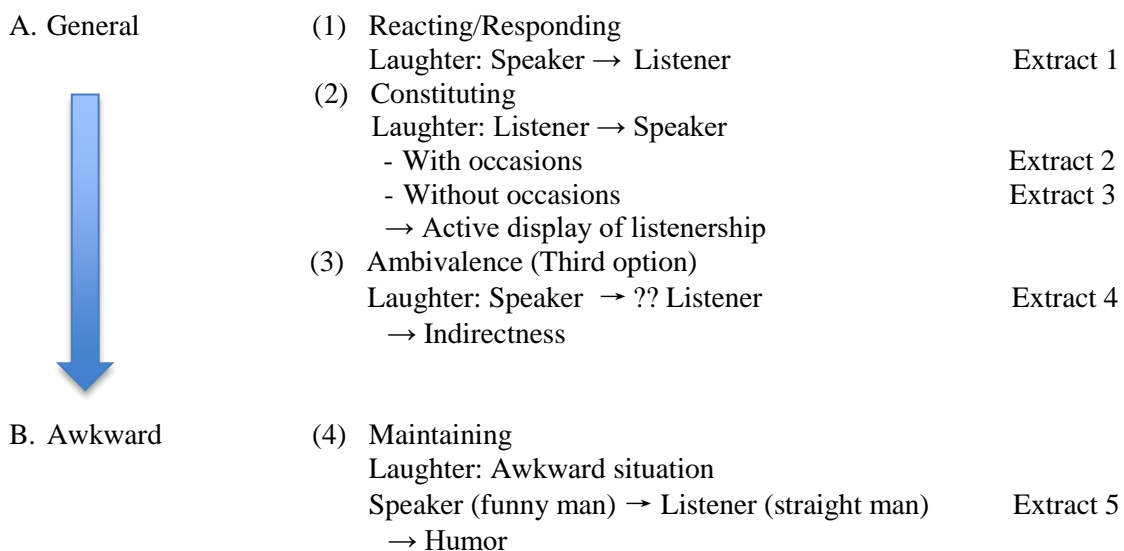
In this section, based on the patterns of laughter, I consider several functions of laughter in terms of the display of listenership. In the previous section, I initially discussed the general cases and then the other case, which was closely intertwined with the treatment of an awkward situation:

- General cases (invitation and acceptance/declination pattern)
 - (1) The initiation of laughter by the speaker → Acceptance by the listener
 - (2) No laughter by the speaker → The initiation of laughter by the listener (acceptance)
 - (3) The initiation of laughter → Ambivalence by the listener (third option)
- Awkward treatment

Laughter between the speaker and listener

With respect to (1), the listener reacts through laughter to the initial laughter of the speaker. In this sense, the function of this listener’s laughter is identified as “responding/reacting.” In contrast to (1), (2) lacks the speaker’s laughter. However, the listener actively and creatively discovers a funny point in the previous production. Therefore, the second case indicates the active display of listenership compared with the first one. The second function of laughter is named “constituting.” These two functions of laughter appeared in certain general cases; sometimes, laughter was involved in awkward situations. Laughter dealt with such situations in an ongoing interaction by “maintaining” not only the ongoing conversation but also the relationship between the participants (see Figure 2):

Figure 2. The functions of laughter in terms of listenership



6 Listenership and the coproduction of a conversation

Based on the interactional functions of laughter that are closely associated with listenership, the extracts discussed in this study suggest that several aspects are interwoven toward achieving the coproduction of conversation. The first aspect refers to conversational roles. As shown in all the

extracts, the participants, speakers and listeners in the current database, fulfilled their role in each interaction; besides, they flexibly played the humorous roles of funny man and straight man in an awkward situation that was emergent and improvised interactional contexts. In addition to the conversational roles, the second aspect, social roles, was embedded in the ongoing interaction. For instance, the student and student dyad in the in-group relationship played the humorous role as mentioned above. In the out-group relation, role-play comprising the funny man and straight man was rarely observed, and such a conversational scene confirms that the participants shared an intimate relationship and the humorous interactions increased their solidarity. Moreover, the current data suggest that conversational moments are not fixed; rather, they are dynamic, as the third aspect: shifting conversation. Although all the extracts depicted such an aspect, the last extract was, in particular, prominent in terms of this aspect. In an awkward situation, self-deprecation by the speaker dramatically changed the forthcoming interaction, and the active listenership by the partner who played the role of a straight man created a humorous effect, which was embedded in the ongoing interaction, and achieved the coproduction of the conversation. In order to accomplish the coproduction of a conversation, these three aspects were tightly interwoven, and they referred to the emergent and spontaneous aspects of the ongoing interaction. Under this interwoven context, listenership could work as a bridge for creating the coproduction of conversation.

7 Conclusion

This study discovered the patterns and interactional functions of laughter as a display of listenership by considering both general and deviant cases. The findings of this study suggest flexible ways of achieving the coproduction of a conversation. In relation to these patterns and functions, I discussed how the above three aspects, conversational roles, social roles, and shifting conversations, work together to achieve the coproduction. A limitation of this study is that it considered only one deviant case, which played a significant role in deepening the discussion on the current coproduction of a conversation. I suggest that the other cases should be taken into account to understand the functions of listenership in relation to laughter and the manner of coproduction of a conversation. Despite this limitation, this study on listenership clarifies how people are connected to one another and how the communication between people can be established in a dynamic and flexible manner.

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