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# **USING LAUGH RESPONSES TO DEFUSE COMPLAINTS**

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## USING LAUGH RESPONSES TO DEFUSE COMPLAINTS

### **Abstract**

This research uses conversation analysis to explore a collection of extracts from telephone calls involving laughter as a response in a sequence characterised by complaining. In these instances the laugh responses fail to align with the complaint in progress and are somewhat disaffiliative (in that they do not display the same stance as that taken by the complainant). However, they do not strongly disaffiliate; they do not, for example, overtly disagree with complaint-relevant assessments produced in prior turns. In this way, recipients of a complaint work to display a somewhat discordant stance to that of the teller, and to discourage further development of the topic in progress while maintaining social solidarity.

The current research adds to the finding (see also Drew, 1987; and Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff, 1987) that laughter can be located somewhere in the middle of a continuum ranging from overt affiliation to disaffiliation (Glenn, 2003: Chapter 6). It also adds to the evidence for laughter being termination-relevant (Holt, 2010). Furthermore, because the laugh responses in these extracts are a second go at discouraging further development of the complaints, it suggests this device may be a resource drawn on when other attempts have failed.

*Key words:* conversation analysis, laughter, complaints, affiliation, alignment.

Research in conversation analysis has clearly demonstrated that members of society generally seek to maintain social solidarity in encounters (Clayman, 2002). Participants work to affiliate and align with each other as they interact. Many studies testify to the range of methods participants employ to avoid disagreement, disaffiliation, non-alignment, or to minimise and remedy the actual or incipient occurrence of such sequences when they emerge.<sup>1</sup> Certain actions in interaction seem to be particularly potentially problematic: one of these is complaining about another's (third party's) conduct. For the complainant, procuring the other's affiliation in such environments may be particularly important given that the complainer evokes the moral order, claiming some transgression (Drew, 1998). The care with which complainers seek to establish their recipients' affiliation is testified to by the way in which complaints are recurrently managed. In analysing an instance, Drew and Curl (2008: 2405) point out that it is initiated "cautiously", that the participants "collaboratively *co-construct*" the complaint, prior to "*escalation*" once the collaboration of both participants is established. Thus, according to Drew and Curl, complaints are launched cautiously and complainers seek to establish the affiliation and alignment of the participants before the complaint is made explicit (p.2412). Edwards (2005:5) outlines some of the potential dangers involved in complaining,

rather than simply reporting factual and complainable matters, a complainer may (also, or instead) be heard as moaning, whinging, ranting, biased, prone to complaining, paranoid, invested, over-reacting, over-sensitive, or whatever other vernacular category might apply.

Thus, doing complaining is a potentially tricky activity that is recurrently handled rather delicately by complainants. For recipients collaborating in a complaint is also a potentially problematic matter. Given the moral work done in complaining, recipients may, on occasion, be reluctant to affiliate with the teller. Failing to do so is a socially discordant action that can cause offense and have wide reaching implications for the relationship between the participants. On the other hand, affiliating may implicate the recipient in a stance about the culpability of the actions of the complained-about person(s) that they may not wish to collaborate in.

In this article I report on a device used by recipients of a complaint that is somewhere between the extremes of affiliation/disaffiliating and aligning/non-aligning<sup>2</sup> and thus is particularly useful to complaint recipients in avoiding fully-affiliating and discouraging further development of the telling. In the extracts analysed here, recipients produce laughter to turns that are adding to an in progress complaint. These laugh responses do not fully affiliate with the complaint in that they display a discordant stance, and they do not fully align in that they do not add to the development of the complaint. Instead, they are recurrently somewhat disengaged and termination-relevant.

The extracts presented here are from two party telephone calls. They form part of a much larger collection of instances involving laughter in interaction (analysed using conversation analysis). In a small number of instances<sup>3</sup> I noticed that recipients of complaints produced laugh responses during an in progress complaint at points where there was nothing about prior turns that invited laughter. In fact, prior turns recurrently

involved strongly negative assessments. These laugh responses are pretty minimal and equivocal. They do not sound particularly mirthful, but each contains several recognisable beats of laughter. In fact, their delivery and design is intricately bound up with their contribution to the sequences, as will become clearer in the analysis that follows.

In this article I focus on three instances in order to explore the sequential patterns that underpin these sequences in some detail. Analysis of these instances will demonstrate that laughter can constitute a midrange response. To better display the possibilities that exist between affiliation/disaffiliation and alignment/non-alignment, and thus, what 'mid range' means, I begin by presenting two extracts to illustrate the ends of the spectrum of responses: in the first extract a complaint receives an affiliative response; in the second, a troubles-telling receives a disaffiliative response.

In the following excerpt (analysed by Drew and Curl, 2008: 2401) the participants clearly display affiliation and alignment in this complaint about a teacher at a school they have both taught at.

(1) [Holt:M88:1:5:3]

1 Robbie: I: find her I get t'the sta:ge w'r I: I:  
2 come out'v staff room cz I feel like saying  
3 t'her .hhh (0.2) if you don' w'nna p't  
4 anything int'teaching, th'n why dn't  
5 you get out.=  
6 Lesley: =That's ri:gh[t,

7 Robbie: [Did you f-

8 (.) Di[d you (feel the]sam[e)

9 Lesley: [ Y e : s . ]Yes[she's

10 just ticking over isn't sh[e.

11 Robbie: [Oh:↓: it's

12 ridicu[lous.

13 Lesley: [Ye:s:.=

14 Robbie: =I[really feel very]( )

15 Lesley: [W e l l it's ni]ce to have this

16 cha:t['n know that=

17 Robbie: [Oh!

18 Lesley: =you feel the same .hhhh

In response to Robbie’s complaint about the teacher in lines 1 to 5, Lesley produces a strong affiliation, “That’s ri:ght” (line 6). When, in the next turn, Robbie asks Lesley if she felt the same, she again produces an emphatic agreement (with ‘yes’ repeated twice [line 9]) and what is packaged as an independently arrived at assessment that supports Robbie’s portrayed stance (lines 9 and 10). This is followed by another complaint-relevant assessment by Robbie in lines 11 and 12, “Oh:↓: it’s ridiculous.”, with which Lesley agrees in overlap at line 13. Drew and Curl (2008: 2401) write:

They are plainly aligned in their assessments or view of Robbie’s colleague (Lesley’s ex-colleague), evident both in their affiliations with one another and Lesley’s summary that *you feel the same* [line 18].

Here, then, Lesley, strongly affiliates and aligns with the initial complaint by Robbie in lines 1 to 5, and they both collaborate to maintain a shared stance over the following turns.

By contrast, in the next extract (analysed by Jefferson, 1984b: 306-61) a troubles-recipient fails to align and affiliate with the teller.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this excerpt, A (who Jefferson describes as having “a talent for turning cheer to gloom” [p.358]) has been talking about her health problems when M begins laughing and then explains that she is laughing at her cat (- the “she” referred to at the start of the extract). A then begins talking about her cat which she “got rid of”.

(2)[SBL:IV:6:17]

1 M: ...she just cli(h)mbed up and was tappi(h)ng  
2 m(h)e o(h)n th(h)e sho(h)u(h)lde(h)r .hhhh  
3 I loo[ked back there to]  
4 A: [We miss that ] °beautiful° that  
5 Gau:cho so:, mhh[h<sub>h</sub>mh  
6 M: [Ye::ehh hehh  
7 A: Cla::rence,  
8 (.)  
9 M: .uhhh[h<sub>h</sub> O h: : : : : : : : : : : :]  
10 A: £[mi:sses him so he says it's]=  
11 =terrible.£  
12 M: Ye:::[:ah,  
13 A: [I'm sick I ever got rid of

14                   him [I really am,  
15    M:                   [ehh hah huh  
16                   (0.2)  
17    M:               You could have kept him

According to Jefferson, M exhibits some “troubles-resistance” in this extract<sup>5</sup>: At line 17 she produces the “strongly troubles-resistant” (p.360) suggestion that M could have kept the cat, thus avoiding the problem. In this, then, the recipient of a troubles-telling fails to affiliate with the teller’s displayed stance. Further, it is interesting to note that, in line 15, M laughs. Thus, just before her troubles-resistant response in line 16, M produces three beats of laughter which, as a response to the prior turn, does not affiliate with A’s stance or align with the troubles telling. Here, then, the laughter constitutes a midrange response prior to a more overtly disaffiliative one in line 17.

In this article I will show that laugh responses can fall somewhere between the extremes of affiliation and disaffiliation, providing a highly useful device for recipients of complaints to avoid either more fully affiliating and aligning on the one hand, or disaffiliating and non-aligning on the other. Previous analysis of laughter in interaction has found it to be generally affiliative and occasionally non-affiliative (see, for example, Schenkein, 1972; O’Donnell-Trujillo and Adams, 1983; Adelswärd, 1989; Haakana, 1999, 2002; Osvaldsson, 2004; Glenn, 2010; Markaki, Merlino, Mondala and Oloff, 2010, and Vöge, 2010). However, two studies in particular identified laughter as occupying a more medial position between the extremes of affiliation and disaffiliation. In an analysis of teasing by Drew (1987) it transpired that laughter occurred as a response in about one-third of the instances in the collection. Drew described the array of responses

as positioned along a continuum from “po-faced” responses at one end, to going along with the tease at the other. Laughter accompanies responses ranging from the extreme of going along with it (involving “laughing acceptance + further quip” [p.225] in the extract analysed by Drew), through “laughing acceptance followed by serious rejection” (p.225), to an initial serious response rejecting the teasing proposal followed by laughter prompted by others. Thus, laughter in response to teases is not necessarily affiliating or accepting, but can accompany responses that reject the tease.

In a study of laughter in sequences involving impropriety, Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff, (1987) found that laughter occupied a midpoint on a continuum of responses ranging from the most affiliative to the least. The responses they identified are: 1. recipient of the impropriety “*disaffiliates*” (p.160); 2. the recipient *declines to respond*” (p.161); 3. the recipient “*disattends*” (p.161) the impropriety; 4. the recipient “*appreciates*” (p.161) the impropriety – this can be done through laughter; 5. the recipient “*affiliates*” (p.162); 6. the recipient “*escalates*” (p.162) the impropriety. Thus, again laughter is not necessarily associated with overt affiliation. In summarizing these two studies, Glenn (2003: 122) writes,

These articles establish grounds for showing how laughter affiliates with potentially volatile laughables and thus may implicate the laugher in these very activities. At the same time, laughter offers a basis for resisting the activities, not overtly as may be done through other means, but subtly in ways that perhaps maintain affiliation.

The extracts analysed below add further weight to the finding that laughter can be a subtle means of resisting ongoing activities while simultaneously avoiding explicit disaffiliation.

### **Laugh responses to complaints**

I begin by presenting instances from my collection, whereby a laugh response occurs in the environment of a complaint.<sup>6</sup> In the first extract in this section Lesley and her mother are discussing Mum's friend who she regularly meets at church and who sometimes comes to tea after the evening service. Mum explains that while her friend will continue to attend church in the evenings, she (Mum) has switched to attending church in the mornings (due to the dark autumn evenings), and thus her friend will no longer be coming to her house for tea afterwards.

(3)Holt:SO88(II):2:8:8

- 1 Les: Oh sh- so she still comes t'chu↑:rch  
2 does she in the eve[nɪŋs]?  
3 Mum: [Oh yes c'z someone takes her h-all  
4 the way ho:me.  
5 Les: .hhh hOh:.  
6 Mum: °So:, hm:, h[m so she's alright, °  
7 Les: [.hh  
8 Les: That's a bit'v'n imposition though isn'tit?  
9 (0.3)

10 Mum: What ↑dear?

11 Les: .hhhh

12 (.)

13 Mum: ↑Well they don't seem t'mind, °hm°

14 (.)

15 Les: .tch uh Don' take ↑you home though ↑do they.

16 Mum: → nuh ↑heh huh

17 (.)

18 Mum: We-:ll?

19 Les: .t.hhhhhh

20 Mum: They ↑would if I: p-if I:-: press[ed ↓for it?

21 Les: [.hhhhhhhhhhh

22 Les: Ye:s:.

23 Mum : B't I don't. Huh hm:.

24 (0.4)

25 Les: hAh:.

26 Mum: Actually the pers'n 't use 't'take me:

Extract (3) is an instance of “going too far” analysed by Drew and Walker (2009) where a participant makes a complaint on the other’s behalf, but he or she does not affiliate with it. Towards the start of the extract Mum tells Lesley that her friend is given a lift home after the evening service. Drew and Walker note that there may be an embedded complaint in Mum’s turns conveyed by elements such as “all the way ho:me” and “so

she's alright,". So, according to Drew and Walker, Lesley's turn "That's a bit'v'n imposition though isn't it?" might bring the embedded complaint to the surface (or, at least, Lesley orients to it as a complaint). Mum's response, "Well they don't seem t'mind", is not fully affiliative. However, Lesley pursues the complaint in her next turn, "Don' take ↑you home though ↑do they". Up until now the talk has focused on Mum's friend, but here Lesley makes a direct comparison between the treatment her friend receives, and that given to her mum. Drew and Walker point out that "it is constructed argumentatively, with the contrastive *though*" (p.2411). So, in an environment where Lesley has already received a less than affiliative response (line 13), she pursues and escalates the complaint. Mum responds with three beats of laughter. It is high-pitched and has three voiced /h/ sounds.

It is possible to identify four stages in this sequence:

1. In line 8 Lesley makes a complaint (on Mum's behalf): building on the possible embedded complaint in Mum's prior turn, Lesley says "That's a bit'v'n imposition though isn't it?" which explicitly assesses the friend's actions in a critical way.
2. In the next turn her mum provides a less than fully affiliative response, "↑Well they don't seem t'mind, °hm°" (line 13).
3. Lesley then pursues the complaint with ".tch uh Don' take ↑you home though ↑do they" (line 15) which escalates it by specifically addressing the inequity of treatment between Mum and her friend, and is built argumentatively.
4. In line 16 Mum produces a laugh response.

It turns out that this pattern is discernable in the other extracts which constitute my collection. Thus, in the next extract it is also possible to identify:

1. A complaint
2. A non-affiliative or less than fully-affiliative response
3. Pursuit and upgrade of the complaint
4. A laugh response

(4)Holt:X(C):1:1:1:17

(Mum has told Lesley that her daughter-in-law informed her she would probably send money for Lesley's son's birthday)

- 1 Les: .hh Yes but when she sends Mu:m she only ↑se:nds a very  
2 little .hh I m' ↑all that talk about (0.2) generosity:  
3 (0.6) .t.hhh (.) eh-:-:m she hasn't been at ↑all genero  
4 generous to th'm in that way.  
5 (0.3)  
6 (M): °°(Really:)°°  
7 (1.2)  
8 Les: .p.hh (.) Anyway we sh'l see.  
9 (0.4)  
10 (M): °(Mm:)°  
11 (0.4)  
12 (:): (.t)

13 (0.2)

14 Les: .tc[h.hhh (0.2) What we sh'll ((nasal)) see::,

15 (M): [°( )°

16 Mum: Well, (.) you know the: thih- these days things're ↑so

17 ex:pensive aren't they.

18 (.)

19 Les: ↑Oh ↑ye:s u-but she ex↑pects it the ↑other ↑wa:y.=

20 Mum: =Mm:. H[m:.

21 Les: ['r you wouldn't ↑mi↓:[nd.

22 Mum: [Hm.

23 (0.2)

24 Mum: [Mm,

25 Les: [..hh An' she gets ↑↑it the other way. B't she['s ne- ih-

26 Mum: [°( )°

27 Les: but we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd

28 uh: ↑Christmas ↓presents.

29 (.)

30 Mum: → ↑Ah hah↑

31 (0.2)

32 Mum: Dear dear dea:r hn

33 (0.6)

34 Mum: ↑Hm::

35 (.)

36 Mum: Never ↓mind,  
 37 Les: .hhhhhh  
 38 Mum: °Oh ↑now w't wz I goin' t' sa::y eh°  
 39 (1.0)  
 40 Les: .kh[hhhh  
 41 Mum: [I went there las' night cz they went out to dinner  
 42 at (0.3) Canterbury

In this extract Lesley and her Mum are talking about Mum's daughter-in-law. Prior to the extract Mum has said that her daughter-in-law told her she would send money for Lesley's son's birthday. Lesley then produces a complaint about the amount of money that she sends, saying that she isn't generous (lines 1 to 4). It then appears that the topic is moving to a close with Mum doing little, possibly nothing, in terms of contributing, and Lesley producing a summary, "Anway we sh'l see." (line 8), and after pauses and no clear response from Mum, she adds "What we sh'll see:," (line 14). At this point Mum produces a turn relating to the prior topic and built somewhat argumentatively, "Well, (.) you know the: thih- these days things're ↑so ex:pensive aren't they." (lines 16 to 17). Lesley agrees with the assessment, but continues her complaint with "↑Oh ↑ye:s u-but she expects it the ↑other ↑wa:y. 'r you wouldn't ↑mi↓:nd.". This is followed by minimal responses from Mum (lines 21 and 24). Thus, she does not affiliate with Lesley's complaint. But Lesley pursues the complaint further with "An' she gets ↑↑it the other way. B't she's ne- ih- but we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd uh: ↑Christmas ↓presents." (lines 25, 27 and 28). Thus, Lesley adds a further dimension to

the complaint, concerning the comments she makes, which are formulated in a highly negative way with “nasty remarks”. After a micro-pause Mum responds with two beats of laughter: they are high pitched and contain two voiced /h/ sounds.

Thus, in this extract the four stages are as follows:

1. In lines 1 to 4 Lesley complains about the lack of generosity shown by her sister-in-law.
2. In lines 16 and 17 Mum makes an assessment that implicitly defends her daughter-in-law, “Well, (.) you know the: thih- these days things're ↑s<sub>0</sub> ex:pensive aren't they”. Thus, she disaffiliates with Lesley’s complaint. Over several subsequent turns (lines 20, 22, 24 and, possibly, 26) Mum continues to show less than full-affiliation with a series of minimal responses to Lesley’s continuation of the complaint.
3. Lesley pursues and escalates the complaint in lines 25, 27 and 28, saying “we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd uh: ↑Christmas ↓presents.”
4. In response, in line 30 Mum produces a brief two-beat laugh.

These four stages are also observable in the third extract in this section.

(5)Holt:X(C)1:1:1:29

(The ‘she’ referred to in line 3 is Lesley’s mother-in-law who visits once a week.)

- 1 Les: ↑Okay then love, tha- uh:m (.) ↑seee you,  
2 (0.3)

3 Mum: Has she gone ho:me,

4 (.)

5 Les: Who.

6 (0.3)

7 Les: No not yet, she's just going.

8 (0.2)

9 Mum: (°Goodness gracious°)

10 (0.2)

11 Les: ehh huh-he-e-heh

12 Mum: Will y- ( ) ↑tell her we're having a

13 memorial service f'r Louisa

14 Les: No I won't. becuz uh we'll have a big (0.4) lamentation

15 then,

16 (0.5)

17 Mum: Ah[:.

18 Les: [th't she wasn't[the:re,

19 (M): [( )

20 (1.2)

21 Mum: (↑who wasn't there) (Honestly! .hhh)

22 (0.8)

23 Mum: ↑How dare she expect t'be there.

24 Les: £| kno:w ye:s,£

25 Mum: She wz so wicked to Lou:isa.

26 (0.6)

27 Les: → Mm h(h)m (h)m

28 Mum: All those years ago.

29 Les: Ye:s.

30 (.)

31 Les: O[↑ka:y love ]

Extract (5) concerns Lesley's mother-in-law. The "she" in "Has she gone ho:ume" (line 3) refers to the mother-in-law who visits Lesley every Sunday evening. Mum's response to the news that she hasn't left is likely to be "°Goodness gracious", possibly suggesting it is late in the evening for her to be still there. Lesley does not collaborate in the potential complaint but responds with laughter. Mum then shifts to a related matter by asking Lesley whether she has told her about a memorial service that is being held for an acquaintance of Lesley's mother-in-law. Lesley says she won't tell her and adds "becuz uh we'll have a big (0.4) lamentation then,". Thus, Lesley produces an embedded complaint about her. Mum's response takes this further with (possibly) "↑who wasn't there Honestly", then "↑How dare she expect t'be there". This, therefore, upgrades the complaint and, rather than aligning with Lesley's rather more mild complaint (focusing on her mother-in-law's attributed response to the news of the service), it conveys an overtly critical reaction on her own behalf (focusing on her right to attend). Lesley does a response which, on the face of it, appears to be quite affiliative (line 24). However, it does not build on or elaborate the complaint and it appears rather weak in the face of Mum's upgraded turn. Furthermore it is said with smile voice (as indicated by the pound

signs). The “I kno:w” claims epistemic priority (see Heritage and Raymond, 2005) without expanding the complaint, and the smile voice may treat it as less than entirely serious. Mum pursues the complaint further with an upgraded criticism, “She wz so wicked to Lou:isa”. This claims epistemic access to the mother-in-law’s behaviour. The “so” and her use of the assessment “wicked” constitute this as a strong complaint. In response, following a pause, Lesley produces three beats of breathy laughter each with a nasal sound at the end (transcribed as ‘m’).

Again, then, it is possible to identify the four stages:

1. In lines 21 and 23 Mum responds to Lesley’s complaint with her own critical evaluations of her mother-in-law saying “(↑Oh dea:r.) (Honestly! .hhh)” and “↑How dare she expect t’be there.”
2. Lesley produces a less than fully affiliative response, “£I kno:w ye:s,£”.
3. Mum purses and upgrades the complaint with “She wz so wicked to Lou:isa.”
4. In line 27 Lesley produces three beats of laughter.

So, in the extracts analysed in this section, laughter occurs as a response to an escalated complaint in an environment where the recipient has produced a previous turn that is not affiliative (or not fully-affiliative). In the next section I focus on the laugh response and the complaint-relevant turn that precedes it in order to explore more fully how the laughter occupies a midpoint on the continua of affiliation/ disaffiliation, alignment/non-alignment.

### **Laugh responses as somewhat disaffiliative and non-aligning**

Stivers (2008) considered alignment and affiliation in responses to storytelling, comparing vocal continuers and nods. She distinguished between alignment and affiliation, describing the former as a contribution that supports the “structural asymmetry of the storytelling activity: that a storytelling is in progress and that the teller has the floor until story completion” (p.34). Disaligned responses, in contrast, “undermine this asymmetry by competing for the floor or failing to treat a story as either in progress – or at story completion – as over” (p.34). Thus, aligned responses support the activity in progress, while disaligned ones undermine it. Affiliation, on the other hand, concerns the stance taken in the telling. With an affiliative response “the hearer displays support of and endorses the teller’s conveyed stance” (p.35).

Alignment and non-alignment, affiliation and disaffiliation can be seen as extremes on continua. Responses can be more or less aligning, non-aligning, affiliative or disaffiliative. Furthermore, whilst Stivers usefully demonstrates that alignment and affiliation are distinct phenomena, in interaction they are often associated. Thus, according to Drew and Walker (2009: 2412) “non-aligned responses can withhold affiliating, and hence convey disaffiliation”. In their analysis of disaffiliation in complaints they write “the co-participants diverge- come to be mis-aligned – when one does not follow the direction in which the other is going.” (2009:2412). In the laugh responses in the extracts in the previous section, participants do not align with the activity in-progress, i.e. making a complaint. The responses do not contribute to, or, in some other way, unambiguously align with the action of the prior turn(s). At the same time, they are

not overtly affiliative either. As well as not following in the same direction, they take a stance which is at odds with the stance taken by the complainant. Whilst the complainants are engaged in criticising the actions of others in unguarded ways, the recipients take a stance that treats the matter as less serious. However, whilst not affiliating with the strongly negative stance of the complainants, the recipients do not take a strongly disaffiliative stance either. For example, they do not overtly disagree with the critical assessments made by complainants.

To illustrate this I will consider the laugh responses in extracts 3-5 in more detail in this section.

### (3) Detail

15 Les: .tch uh Don' take ↑you home though ↑do they.

16 Mum: → nuh ↑hhuh

By laughing Mum does not explicitly align with Lesley's action: she does not build on or add to the complaint. She does not clearly affiliate either: she does not offer an explicit agreement or in some other way display a similar stance (in fact, as shown above, she proceeds to somewhat disagree by saying that they would take her home if she "pressed for it"). There appears to be slight "n" sound at the start of the laughter. Thus, there may be just the merest hint of an agreement (i.e. "no") that is then lost in laughter. But as an initial response to an explicit complaint (on the other's behalf) it is rather minimal, and the stance it conveys is extremely ambiguous (and not explicitly agreeing).

Similarly, in (4), with the laugh response, the recipient of a complaint declines to fully align or affiliate.

(4) Detail

25 Mum: She wz so wicked to Lou:isa.

26 (0.6)

27 Les: → Mm h(h)m (h)m

The laugh-response in 27 does not affiliate with M's highly critical assessment in line 25. As Pomerantz (1984) has shown, the preferred response to an assessment is generally an agreement. Lesley's laughter does not constitute a clear agreement. It is also non-aligned with Mum's criticism as it does not match the valence of the turn in terms of complaining about Lesley's mother-in-law. What exactly it is doing is ambiguous, adding to its equivocal nature. As a response to such a critical assessment, it sounds very minimal and topically disengaged (Jefferson, 1993). This is contributed to by both the noticeable delay preceding the laughter and the design of the turn itself. Its acoustics (with the "m" sounds) make it sound like a "mh mhm" response which is laughed through. These coalesce to make it sound termination-relevant and thus non-aligned with the activity of complaining evident in Mum's turn.

Again, in the next extract, the laughter does not affiliate or align with the complaint made in prior turns.

(5) Detail

25 Les: [.hh An' she gets ↑↑it the other way. B't she['s ne- ih-  
 26 Mum: [°( )°  
 27 Les: but we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd  
 28 uh: ↑Christmas ↓presents.  
 29 (.)  
 30 Mum: → ↑Ah hah↑

Mum's laugh response at line 30 does not affiliate with the complaint evident in Lesley's prior turn. Lesley's turn is highly critical of her sister-in-law, containing the upgraded assessment "nasty remarks". Mum's response does not affiliate by agreeing with, or contributing to, the complaint. In that it does not contribute to the complaint and is ambiguous, minimal and somewhat disengaged, it is also non-aligned: it is ill-fitted to the elaborate and highly evaluative nature of the prior turn. The two short bursts of laughter, the design of the turn (especially with the initial "Ah") and the high pitch, suggest something like surprise (see Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006). Thus, it may be that Mum implicitly orients to this as a surprising report as opposed to explicitly treating it as a complaint. In this way, the stance she takes towards the report is extremely ambiguous. But what it does not do is explicitly collaborate in, or in some other way, support Lesley's complaint about her sister-in-law.

So, the laugh responses can be viewed as occupying a midpoint somewhere between the extremes of alignment and non-alignment. On the one hand they do not "follow the direction in which the other is going" (Drew and Walker, 2009:2412) by adding to the

complaint. On the other, they do minimally, but in a disengaged way, respond to the prior turn. Furthermore, they are not affiliative in that they do not display a similar stance to the highly critical ones expressed in prior turns. Rather, the stance they take is highly ambiguous and ill-fitted: prior turns invite an elaborate response (for example, an agreement with the critical assessments), but these turns contrast with prior ones by being minimal and disengaged.

### **Laugh responses as a second go at disaffiliating.**

Above I showed that complaint-recipients have already produced disaffiliative (or not fully-affiliative) turns prior to the laugh responses. But these turns failed to discourage complaint makers from extending (and, in fact, escalating) the complaint further. Thus, these laugh responses are a second go at displaying the recipients' lack of enthusiasm for joining in with the complaints. Aspects of their design make them well suited to being subsequent attempts to disaffiliate with the complaint-telling. Thus, in this section I examine the sequences just prior to the complaint escalation and laugh-response in order to explore the relationship between the laugh responses and the previous disaffiliative turns.

First I return to extract (3).

#### (3) Detail

8 Les: That's a bit'v'n imposition though isn'tit?

9 (0.3)

10 Mum: What ↑dear?

- 11 Les: .hhhh  
 12 (.)  
 13 Mum: ↑Well they don't seem t'mind, °hm°

In line 13 Mum produces a turn that aligns with the sequence in progress in that it answers the question proposed by Lesley at line 8. However, it is not affiliative. As well as being delayed and begun with “↑well” (recurrently associated with dispreferred turns [Pomerantz, 1984]), it takes a somewhat oppositional stance: whilst not denying that it is “n imposition” it does undermine the reason for Lesley’s concern.

Similarly in extract (4), the complaint recipient’s turn prior to the continuation of the complaint-telling aligns with the activity while, at the same time, disaffiliating with the stance taken.

(4) Detail

- 16 Mum: Well, (.) you know the: thih- these days things're ↑so  
 17 ex:pensive aren't they.  
 18 (.)  
 19 Les: ↑Oh ↑ye:s u-but she ex↑pects it the ↑other ↑wa:y.=  
 20 Mum: =Mm:. H[m:.  
 21 Les: [r you wouldn't ↑mi↓:[nd.  
 22 Mum: [Hm.  
 23 (0.2)

24 Mum: [Mm,

As Lesley moves towards topic termination just prior to the sequence in this detail, Mum (lines 16 and 17) takes a turn that somewhat aligns with the activity of complaining that Lesley is engaged in at the start of the extract (reproduced in section 2) in that it raises another complaint-relevant issue (-the cost of “things”). However, Mum’s turn is disaffiliative with Lesley’s stance in that it implicitly defends the daughter-in-law’s actions, offering a possible reason for her lack of generosity. Following Lesley’s continuation of the complaint Mum produces several tokens which minimally align with the activity but do not explicitly or strongly affiliate.

In the following extract the recipient’s turn prior to the escalated complaint is the most affiliative of the three instances. However, there are elements which render it less than fully-affiliative.

(5) Detail

21 Mum: (↑who wasn’t there) (Honestly! .hhh)

22 (0.8)

23 Mum: ↑How dare she expect t’be there.

24 Les: £| kno:w ye:s,£

Lesley’s response to Mum’s highly critical evaluation of her mother-in-law’s purported attitude is not entirely well fitted. It does not build on Mum’s turn and is a weak

agreement in the face of such a strong complaint. Furthermore, the smile voice adds to its lack of fittedness in that it conveys a less condemnatory stance than that taken by her mother.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in each of the extracts the laugh responses follow previous disaffiliative responses by the complaint-recipients. Interestingly, in extracts (3)-(5), the prior responses are disaffiliative or not fully affiliative (as in extract [3]), but they align (to an extent) with the action of the prior turns (i.e. they contribute to the complaint by addressing matters raised in the prior turns). Thus, in (3) Mum produces a somewhat disagreeing turn in response to Lesley's suggestion that giving her friend a lift is an "imposition", in (4) Mum offers a reason that may implicitly account for the sister-in-law's reported lack of generosity, in (5) Lesley agrees with the prior turn (though the smile voice suggests a less critical stance).

In contrast to prior disaffiliative turns considered in this section, the laugh responses are more non-aligning: while prior turns do address the complaint (while displaying a disaffiliative/not fully-affiliative stance), these do not explicitly align with the complaint by adding to it, but are, instead, rather disengaged.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while previous attempts to take a somewhat discordant stance do align (to an extent) with the sequence in progress (i.e. complaining), subsequent responses (i.e. laugh responses) are both disaffiliative and non-aligning. In being disengaged they make topic-termination potentially relevant. Analysis of turns following the laugh responses suggests that, indeed, recipients may select a laugh response because of its termination-relevance.

### Laugh responses and topic termination

Analysis of the ongoing talk throws further light on the action of these highly ambiguous laugh responses. Turns following the responses reveal complaint-recipients to be moving towards topic termination. In the previous section I showed that in being non-aligned, disaffiliative, and topically disengaged, laugh responses are potentially termination-relevant. Analysis of subsequent turns provides further evidence for this by showing that complaint-recipients maintain a trajectory of topic closure.

Thus, in extract (4) Mum produces a number of rather disengaged, termination-relevant responses following the laugh response prior to introducing a new (related) topic in lines 38, 41 and 42.

#### (4) Continuation

27 Les: but we get nasty remarks about not being able to affo:rd  
28 uh: ↑Christmas ↓presents.  
29 (.)  
30 Mum: ↑Ah hah↑  
31 (0.2)  
32 Mum: Dear dear dea:r hn  
33 (0.6)  
34 Mum: ↑Hm::  
35 (.)  
36 Mum: Never ↓mind,

37 Les: .hhhhh

38 Mum: °Oh ↑now w't wz I goin' t' sa::y eh°

39 (1.0)

40 Les: .kh[hhhh

41 Mum: [I went there las' night cz they went out to dinner

42 at (0.3) Canterbury

Following the laugh response in line 30 there is a short pause. Mum then takes another turn with “dear” repeated three times in quick succession. To a small extent this orients to the troubles-relevant nature of Lesley’s complaint (“dear” perhaps carrying some implication of sympathising), however, at the same time it does not strongly affiliate with Lesley. Like the laugh response that precedes it, it seems to suggest a reluctance to take the complaint entirely seriously or to fully engage with it. It is topic closing-implicative in that it disengages from the details of the telling, and the repetition of the same token gives it a removed and formulaic-sounding nature. According to Stivers (2004) multiple sayings or a word can be used to show that the speaker is addressing the action in-progress rather than just the prior turn. Further, in doing so they “communicate their stance that the prior speaker has persisted unnecessarily in the prior course of action and should properly halt (the) course of action” (p.260).

After a short pause and a minimal token Mum produces “Never ↓mind” (line 36). This also sounds somewhat sympathetic but dismissive. Again it is disengaged from the details of the telling and is termination relevant. In line 38 Mum then does a disjunctive topic

shift to talk about her going to the house to babysit. According to Drew and Walker (2009: 2412) disjunctive terminations “are characteristic of disaffiliative sequences”.

Thus, the laugh response forms part of a sequence of several turns in which Mum fails to fully-affiliate with Lesley’s complaint. The turns at lines 30, 32, and 36 suggest a stance that does not take the complaint entirely seriously and they constitute a move away from talk about the complaint itself to disengaging with the topic and thus making topic termination relevant.

In the next extract, the turn of laughter and the answer that follows it precede a less disjunctive transition to a related matter.

(3) Continuation

- 15 Les: .tch uh Don’ take ↑you home though ↑do they.
- 16 Mum: nuh ↑hhuh huh
- 17 (.)
- 18 Mum: We-:ll?
- 19 Les: .t.hhhhhh
- 20 Mum: They ↑would if I: p-if I:-: press[ed ↓for it?
- 21 Les: [.hhhhhhhhhhh
- 22 Les: Ye:s:.
- 23 Mum : B’t I don’t. Huh hm:.
- 24 (0.4)
- 25 Les: hAh:.

26 Mum: Actually the pers'n 't use 't'take me: (.) bring me home  
 27 now 'n again .h does't come in the evening much now  
 28 becuz .h he's been in hospit'l [and ee[z (not )]=  
 29 Lesley: [.t.h [Oh is ]=  
 30 Lesley: =[he alright  
 31 Mun: =[ ( very) good,  
 32 (0.4)  
 33 Mum: Eh: well 'ee ↑had a (0.4) .tch.h ee had a:ehm: whatchec-  
 34 an operation you know a=  
 35 Lesley: =°↑hm Yes.

At the start of this extract Lesley says “Don take ↑you home though ↑do they”. Following the laugh response in line 16 Mum proceeds to add another turn construction unit which treats Lesley’s turn as a question by providing an answer, “They ↑would if I: p-if I:-: pressed ↓for it”. Mum then adds “B’t I don’t” following Lesley’s agreement token (line 22). In that it continues from Mum’s prior turn (in line 20) it does not substantially add to the matter and thus, is somewhat closing-implicative. This is contributed to by the breathy noise at the end of line 23 and the pause in line 24. Lesley’s minimal turn in line 25 may display her willingness to go along with the closing trajectory. In line 26 Mum introduces talk about the person who used to give her a lift home occasionally. She reports that he has been to hospital, and the nature of his illness is then addressed over subsequent turns, thus forming a transition to a related, but distinct, matter.

In these extracts the speakers who do the laugh responses initiate topic transition soon after and complaint-makers collaborate in these moves. However, in the next extract the complaint-maker pursues topical talk over several more turns until the participants finally move (back into) closing. Thus it is possible to see the participants pursuing different trajectories over a number of turns until the topic is finally closed.

(5) Continuation

- 25 Mum: She wz so wicked to Lou:isa.  
26 (0.6)  
27 Les: → Mm h(h)m (h)m  
28 Mum: All those years ago.  
29 Les: Ye:s.  
30 (.)  
31 Les: O[↑ka:y love ]  
32 Mum: [(A : : s u]sual.) If Louisa had (know:n) she wouldn't  
33 've uh (0.5) carted Missiz Field abou:t like she did (.)  
34 all the ti:me,  
35 (0.2)  
36 Les: No:,  
37 Mum: Taking'er to to:wn an' to do ( )- do 'er shopping  
38 (0.3) everywhere she wanted to go Louisa use to take'er  
39 in th'ca:r,  
40 (0.2)

41 Les: Ye:s th't's ri:ght,  
42 Mum: Yep  
43 (0.2)  
44 Les: °M[m°  
45 Mum: [Got qu<sup>ı</sup>ite a lot'v (0.4) se<sup>ı</sup>vice out'v Louisa,  
46 Les: Ye(h)es ↓hn hn↓ .hhhh  
47 (.)  
48 Mum: Ok<sup>a</sup>y love  
49 Les: ↑Bye then,  
50 (.)  
51 Mum: Mu<sup>s</sup>n't grumble, (hm-[hm)  
52 Les: [No,  
53 Mum: Ba[h bye ( )  
54 Les: [↑Bye:,  
56 Mum: Ba<sup>h</sup> bye love

Following Lesley's laugh response in line 27 Mum adds to the complaint with "All those years ago". Lesley produces a minimal agreement token and then initiates a closing with "O↑ka:y love" (line 31). However, this overlaps Mum's continuation of the complaint in lines 32 to 34. In line 36 Lesley produces another minimal agreement (after a short pause), and a more elaborate one in line 41 (again after a short pause) following further pursuit of the complaint by Mum (lines 37 to 39). Mum's turn at line 45, "Got qu<sup>ı</sup>ite a lot'v (0.4) se<sup>ı</sup>vice out'v Louisa," sounds topic termination-relevant in that it moves away

from the detailing to summarise and formulate the preceding talk. Lesley responds with an agreement and laughter (line 46). The laughter here may contribute towards treating this as topic termination-relevant and collaborating in closing it down. Mum then initiates a pre-closing in line 48 (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in this extract the participants pursue different trajectories over a number of turns. The complaint-recipient produces several closing-relevant turns, while the complainant pursues the complaint. The laugh response is, then, fitted to a trajectory of bringing the complaint to a close.

Thus, in each of these extracts the turns of laughter come in sequences where the complaint recipient moves towards topic termination. In (3) and (4) recipients produce further topically-disengaged, termination-relevant turns prior to initiating topic change. In (5) Lesley attempts to initiate a pre-closing in line 31, but is overlapped by Mum's continuation. She then produces several termination-relevant turns while Mum pursues the complaint. Finally, in line 48, Mum initiates a pre-closing. Thus, the laugh responses contribute towards a closing trajectory. While responding to the prior turn they do not develop the complaint further: they do not add to the detailing of the events complained about; encourage further contributions (as, for example, asking a question would) or strongly affiliate with the complaint. They are minimal and somewhat topically disengaged.

## **6. Conclusion**

The laughter in these extracts is equivocal and minimal, but this contributes to the action of the turns. It adds to their topically disengaged nature as complaint-recipients implicitly disaffiliate and fail to align with the telling. In this way, recipients subtly resist further development of the complaint. Turns preceding the laugh responses show that they contribute to a trajectory whereby the recipient has already produced a disaffiliative contribution which failed to discourage complainants from continuing. In this they may be well suited to being subsequent attempts to disaffiliate in that, as well as displaying an incongruent stance, they also do not overtly align with the telling, instead inviting topic closure.

In a highly implicit way, they convey the recipient's stance towards the complaint, and suggest that they are taking it somewhat lightly. Such a stance may be congruent with bringing talk of a complaining nature to a close. Analysis of troubles-tellings and death announcement has shown that speakers recurrently move away from such negative talk by, for example, formulating the topic in a more positive way (using a "brightside sequence" in death announcements [Holt, 1993], or a "buffer topic" in troubles-tellings [Jefferson, 1984b]). Somewhat similarly, a laugh response may contribute towards moving the talk away from discussion of the heart of the complaint to a less serious level.<sup>10</sup> In this, the laugh responses may be somewhat similar to other turns of, or involving, laughter in interaction as Holt (2010) showed that laughter (particularly shared laughter) is recurrently associated with topic termination.

Analysis of these extracts lends further weight to the finding that, on some occasions of its use, laughter can constitute a midpoint between affiliation and non-affiliation. Here, complaint recipients use these laugh responses to display a somewhat disaffiliative stance with the complaint. They also fail to align with the activity of complaining, at the same time disengaging from the topic and contributing to topic termination. They are, then, subtle ways in which recipients can maintain social concordance, at the same time, avoid fully collaborating in a delicate activity. Furthermore, the fact that they are second goes at discouraging the complaint and displaying a somewhat divergent stance, testifies to the powerful nature of these laugh responses in that they are employed when other attempts have previously failed.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Emmersten and Heinemann (2010) and Heinemann (2009).

<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between affiliation and alignment see Stivers (2008) and below (section 3).

<sup>3</sup> My collection numbers six instances of laugh responses in complaints, but, for reasons of space, I focus on three in this article.

<sup>4</sup> In certain respects, complaints and troubles-tellings are similar (sometimes overlapping) actions/sequences. Both can be treated as problematic (see Jefferson, 1980) and can receive disaffiliative responses (see, for example, Jefferson, 1984b: 358-366). The extract from Jefferson (1984b) considered here, shows (along with three extracts in my corpus) that laugh responses can also be used to display some disaffiliation and non-alignment in troubles-tellings. However, for the purposes of this article, I concentrate on laugh responses to complaints about third parties.

<sup>5</sup> But see Jefferson (1984b:360) for a full analysis of this sequence.

<sup>6</sup> Laugh responses in each of the extracts are arrowed.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to Lesley's turn at line 24, there may be another indication that she does not fully affiliate with Mum's stance: there is a noticeable pause after Mum's expressed indignation at line 21.

<sup>8</sup> On disengaged contributions at topic termination see Jefferson (1993).

<sup>9</sup> In the original transcript Gail Jefferson added a footnote saying "(t)hroughout this segment Leslie seems to be doing friendly censorship of Mum's talk about Mrs Field". Interestingly, although Gail Jefferson was obviously referring to several turns, the footnote number was positioned at the end of the turn comprising laughter (line 27). The expression "friendly censorship" aptly captures the somewhat disaffiliative and non-

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aligned nature of Lesley's turns as she attempts to move towards topic termination. This may be oriented to by Mum in line 51 where she says "musn't grumble".

<sup>10</sup> On treating prior turns non-seriously see Sacks (1992: 672).