Laughter in interaction

By Phillip Glenn


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Laughter in Interaction by Phillip Glenn is a good textbook for those interested in laughter in social settings as a research study. Glenn has been researching laughter for over 25 years; his doctoral dissertation is included in parts of this book, which comes with a tremendous amount of knowledge placed in a small book of a little over 150 pages. This is not a book meant for the reader who is casually or curiously interested in the study of laughter. It is meant for the serious researcher and seeker of knowledge of laughter.

There are few charts and tables in the book, so those who are visual learners may have to struggle to understand the material presented. There is a large amount of text with the only breaks being transcribed conversation. Those readers not familiar with transcription and transcription symbols of the transcribed conversations may require extra time to understand what is being said by whom and where the laughter is located within a sentence. This book is not for the faint of heart.

The statement before the beginning of the book, “Laughter in Interaction is an illuminating and lively account of how and why people laugh during conversation” is true about the “illuminating” but disputable regarding the “lively.” The Introduction contains good overviews of each chapter. This would be the place to check to be certain, reading this book will be helpful, if there was a particular interest a reader had in one aspect of laughter in social interaction.

In Chapter One “Towards a social interactional approach to laughter,” Glenn details previous research done by others and by himself on the topic of laughter. He also defines laughter and discusses how and why people laugh, including the important social aspects of laughing. Laughter is not just laughing, it is much more complex and it involves society. Glenn writes, “it is strongly social, in that its occurrence, form and meaning are shaped deeply by the presence of others, roles, relationships, activities, and other contextual features” (p. 32). Laughter is viewed as an interaction.

In the “Conversation analysis and the study of laughter” chapter, Glenn shows the pattern of laughter through analyzing detailed, transcribed conversations. In chapter Three, “Laughing
together,” the author invites the readers to see how shared laughter starts, what physical clues are given during this time, and the attempts and failures of drawing out further laughter. The next chapter discusses “Who laughs first.” This shows the difference between others laughing first and the speaker initiating laughter. Chapter Five deals with “Laughing at and laughing with: Negotiating participant alignments.” Not all laughter is good. “The phrases *laughing at* and *laughing with* suggest a long-recognized distinction between the power of laughter to promote distancing, disparagement, and feelings of superiority; or, conversely to promote bonding and affection” (p. 112). Glenn also deftly explains in this chapter how to change a “laughing at” to become a “laughing with” experience and vice versa. Most of us have been the object of laughter at some time in our lives and these are the moments to decide whether to stay the “laughed at” in shame and anger, or invite the “laugh with” in merriment and jest.

In chapter Six, “Laughing along, resisting: Constituting relationship and identity,” Glenn writes in the subsection “Laughter and teasing,” “As a response to being teased, laughter shows willingness to acknowledge humorous elements, even if taking the substance of the tease seriously. It stands as a middle-range response between rejection and going along” (p. 123). In this chapter there are many transcription conversations and some of those examples are difficult to follow. The rest of the chapter gives different analyses on other types of laughing along with and resisting laughing along with someone.

Even though the book is short, it contains much information. Unless a study is needed in laughter in interaction, this is not a book to be lightly read. The author “invites readers to contact” him for specific interests mentioned in the book, but with no obvious means of contact except possibly through Cambridge University Press. The cost of the hardback book is also prohibitive, except perhaps for those doing research on the topic. Glenn has done a fine job of managing a very complex subject, written on by many researchers, in a small space.