"It was hecka funny:" Some Features of Children's Conversational Development

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In this election year, we are hearing a lot of attack humor. We hear that the former governor of Texas, Bush, is Vice-President Cheney's young protégé, or that the reason he needed Cheney at the hearings on preparing for 9/11 is that he is still on training wheels. We have always had political humor.

A generation ago, Dick Gregory was a well-known African American stage comedian. His memorable performances are available to us as phonograph recordings. Gregory grew up in extreme poverty in St. Louis, and was involved in the civil rights marches in the sixties. His major political themes were poverty and civil rights. Besides autobiographies, he wrote on American history, so he used historical themes in his comedy routines. He liked to quote the Declaration of Independence on a citizen's duty to protest an unjust government. A current analogue would be to Iraqi resistance to occupation.

In his speeches he used linguistic features as allusions, to make the point that we don't look at black violence the same way as white violence in American history. In the next example, he made an implicit comparison between black rioters and the American colonists' resistance to the British. He gave African American vernacular features to Paul Revere to evoke the shared political situation of colonists resisting the British and Black Panthers resisting the police. Dialect features also contrast the revolutionary Paul Revere with modern viewers. (Ervin-Tripp 2001) This is a 1969 college talk.

(1)

1 [lo, slow] in the *early days, when the british  
*was the *PO:lice,

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1 The data in this paper were collected by an unfunded collaboration of Martin Lampert, Elena Escalera, Susan Ervin-Tripp, and Richard Sprott. The bilingual data come from the dissertation project of Iliana Reyes, and the preschool data from the dissertation data of Elena Escalera. Transcription and coding were done over many years by dozens of undergraduates at Holy Names and at the University of California, Berkeley. Helen Stillman coded the preschool data.
1 a white boy, by the name of Paul Revere
2 rode through the white community and said
3 "git a gun, white folks, the police is comin/
4 [audience laughter, applause]
5 you can understand the white panthas,
6 can’t you,
7 but the black panthas make you forgit
8 about your history,
9 don’t they?^2

Solo comedians like Gregory often switch style, dialect, or language for punch lines or to mark shifts in perspective. In effect, solo comedians represent dialogue by themselves producing different voices.

The focus of this paper is a first look at how these skills develop. The developmental history of humor in children’s dialogue can be seen as a window into the conversational component of pragmatic development.

In adult comedy or adult humorous turns in conversation one can see how a conversationalist accomplishes placement of humor in the conversation, addresses shared perspectives and issues, picks a target every ally in the audience can share, uses code switches effectively, deploys style features either to mimic someone or to allude to social features or values. Adults sometimes take risks to self-presentation or to social relationships in their joking, by giving vocal signals that they are not serious, or by making sure the key of the conversation clearly implies irrealis when they begin to joke about themselves or the listener (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp in press).

In adult spontaneous conversational humor we find the following features:

• many topics outside of the immediate context, chosen from shared interests
• mimicry
• solo narratives
• shared put-down targets
• risking social relations by teasing
• risking self presentation by humor about the self
• variation of language style to mark perspective shifts

In this paper we will not go into detail about the causes of age changes since we have only the outcome behavior. But we can speculate about what changes with age in peer conversation could be due to? They can be about

• changes in memory or processing ability,
• changes in knowledge about the world, broadening possible topics,
• changes in social skills or social goals,
• socialization by others,
• age graded cultural environments.

These data come from an ongoing project over many years on informal interaction. Our studies of humor are an incidental by-product of the conversational data. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp started an analysis of humor with conversations collected by students in university class projects (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 1992; Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 1998).

^2Gregory, Dick. "Black rioters" (1969) from The dark side, the light side, Poppy Records.
Later, we developed a method of taping children with no adults present (Ervin-Tripp 2000). We used recess and lunchtime pairing of mutually chosen friends at the second grade and fifth grade level. The schools were socially contrasted: a middle class parochial school and a working class, heterogeneous public school in the neighborhood of a shipyard. Iliana Reyes added working class immigrant bilingual samples of the same age. Elena Escalera collected some preschool snack time samples. Here our examples are from ages 3, 5, 7, and 10, in contrast with adults.

<table>
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<td>Bilingual class</td>
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<td>7,10</td>
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Reference to topics outside the immediate context

Children's first talk is typically directed to get attention to themselves, to get another person to do something, or to get a hearer's shared attention to something nearby. Very young children, around two or three, do not converse easily with other kids. Some of them don't know how to start a conversation. They can have trouble joining up in activities with others. And all these skills vary of course because some children are more extroverted or get more home experience. Even some adults can't carry on a conversation beyond "oh."

Humor involves laughing at the weird and unexpected, or at the clash of expectation with reality. Early humor is a child's laugh with delight at what happens or at what they see. Since getting attention to something both can see is a common function of early talk, it is not surprising that three and four year olds can get laughter from each other by pointing at or talking about something odd in the context, or by clowning, or by making funny noises, or by dressing up, or by putting a balloon on one's head.

Our interest, however, is in the words that make hearers laugh. We identified all the incidents of laughing or giggling in our transcripts that had identifiable causes. Example 2 is three year olds.

\[(2)\]

247    **Pe:** hey look [laugh] it almost landing on my head
248    and then you have a balloon hat/
249    **Ma:** [laugh] if it touches somebody they'll have
       a balloon hat/

Escalera CSC 5M1

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3 Most of the transcripts use the Gumperz-Berenz notation (Gumperz and Berenz 1993), which was designed for computer transcribing of conversational data. Here we use * for stress, (xxx) for unintelligible speech, [[f] loud speech], [[p] soft speech], :: prolongation, <5> 5 second silence, = overlapping segment =, == latching, / terminal drop
Children's humor calls attention to the context or comments on the context or creates a violation with expectation. Context-based humor is the highest in frequency in the youngest children, and drops off.

That pesto pasta in your lunch is disgusting is a shared attitude here. Children up through seven have a great interest in what is disgusting and find it very funny. The point here is that there is plenty of grist for humor in children's physical surroundings, and as they learn about the world the span of their topics enlarges. The impersonal immediate context is still around a third of the content of humor at seven. But by ten it is unimportant. We will see what has replaced context as the source of humor by ten.

Mimicry

By three children have a range of markers in their speech that indicate either emphasis or role contrasts during dramatic play. By four we hear their changes in loudness, rate, and pitch, we hear funny voice quality, accents, and lexical discourse markers like OK, so, and well. They use markers for turn boundaries, and at later ages they indicate shifts in topics, perspective, and activity frame, and boundaries of episodes.

When preschool children are taking roles, we hear deep voices for representing males, and even accents and medical terminology for representing doctors. Elaine Andersen, in her marvelous studies of role playing, showed that children's youngest role playing uses vocal and phonological features and later adds lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic choices. Four year olds in several languages had people in power like doctors and teachers say well more often (Andersen, Brizeula et al. 1999). That kind of tuned ear means children can be masters of mimicry.

Typically in peer roleplaying, children's voices differentiate whether they are speaking as the director, as the child speaker during planning and commentary, or as an actor in role voice. The issue for us here is when this ability is put at the service of humor, which is a step beyond collaborative play. In the fourth example 3 year old boys say:

(4)
74 D:  come in, come in Batman, come in
75 A:  come in Batman
76 D:  ==this is Robin
77 G:  come in Superman, come in Super- man,

---

Notes:

* Transcript names indicate source, age, gender, group number.
At three, children can take a local stimulus, the microphones, to launch into the voices they think appropriate to Batman and Robin. At five they have moved on to astronauts. In each group three boys join in the role play. (Notice the appearance of overlap repair on line 94 as well).

At all ages from three to ten, the microphone stimulates singing like radio and TV performers with a lot of laughter. The voices of the media are a major resource.

Funny stories are an important part of adult conversational humor, whether fantastic or realistic. But everyone who works with young children has noticed that they don't tell each other anecdotes as much as they tell them to adults.

**Narration**

Why is narrative humor so difficult for children? First, solo stories are extended productions, demanding planning and ample working memory. If they are realistic reports they require recall. Even more important, story-tellers either have to get the partner to yield the floor to a solo performance\(^5\), or get the partner's collaboration in producing the story. In both cases, they have to get interest, which is unlikely in the case of long personal anecdotes. Some adults are willing to scaffold stories, but children aren't. The most collaborative productions in our data are joint role-play drama, which children successfully do by three in some cases and can do well at four. But we found no extended personal funny anecdotes between children in our data until seven.

One extended solo narrative by a three year old on the phone to another child of the same age about a dispute between cats was mostly meows and was interrupted by the completely frustrated other child. The first example in our data is at seven. Example 6 is a successful tale by a seven year old.

\(^5\) Angeliki Nicolopoulou, who has worked with Head Start children, finds that solo narratives appear very early if adults provide the floor for the child's presentation. (Nicolopoulou 2002).
and we were like *picking out a *gazillion
little tiny stones and dad was like
=[f]*stones *stones *stones *stones*/=

T: =laughs
K: =*huh i need *water/= 
T: =laughs
K: =i'm *sick of saying stones//=
T: =laughs
K: =oh um..*Lisa got *tired of *just using one
*tool so she gets =*two sledge *hammers?= 
T: =laughs
K: =and i said *what are you *doing with
the sledge hammer)?

i said/
{}{[ac & hi]*smashing the *dirt?}
{}{(f)**no:: *dumbo}
{}{[ac] you're *just going to make it
*go- (plunge) into *globs)?
{}{[ac]it's like} *oka::y then i'll get *two::
*toothpicks? {[ac] he's like}[sigh]
{}{[lo] you're *just going to
break the *toothpicks
and get a piece of wood *stuck in it)/
{}it's like what *can i do?
{}and dad's like..
{}{[lo] *go clean *up your room}/
{}and like {[f]**no::})?
86  T: {laughs}

UCDisclab T7F4

The other child's laughter throughout shows the success of this anecdote. In the
seventh example, also at seven, there are matched fantasies, each girl using the other's
name to attract interest, and each taking turns having the floor. The first has the format of
a known rhyme, with singsong delivery.

(7)
099  C: t: de de que hablamos?
e: what are we talking about?
100  J: t: um de- de la casa/
e: um of- of the house
101  C: t: okay/ {[singsong reciting]um habia una vez/
e: once upon a time there was
t: una nina que se llamaba Julia /
e: a girl named Julia
t: que estaba en su: casa:/
e: who was in her house
t: y luego el guinea pig se salio a escondida/
e: and then her guinea pig ran away
t: Julia estaba dormida/
e: Julia was sleeping
t: y el coca-cola se salio:,
e: and the coca-cola got out
t: y despues se fue: y se escapo! y *ya
e: and then it left and it escaped already

108  J:  t:  okay
109  C:  t:  y luego Julia estaba llorando
     e:  okay now me,
110 >J:  t:  okay ahora yo,
     e:  okay now me,
111  t:  había una vez Carolina
     se le escapo su perrito
     e:  once there was Carolina; her puppy escaped
112  t:  estaba llorando
     e:  she cried
113  t:  y lleno todo- toda la casa de agua// [giggle]
     e:  and she filled the whole house with water
     [giggle]
114  C:  t:  estoy llorando [fake cry]mm mm mm
     e:  and i'm crying [fake cry] mm mm mm
115  J:  t:  ay =*ma**ma= [giggle]
     e:  oh =no= [giggle]
116  C:  t:  =*ma**ma= [giggle]

Reyes W7F3

 Though we have many shared dramatic performances which tell stories, solo humorous narratives are a later-developing skill. The dominance of joint dramatic narratives is still apparent at ten.

**Targeting others**

A lot of adult humor is about criticism of shared human targets. Vice President Dan Quayle was the butt under Bush I, and now whole books take Bush II on with humor. This practice of common targeting starts in three year old children by teasing each other, since the other child is close at hand, in a way part of the context. We see this in example 8.

(8)
102  D:  coocoo poopoo head! [giggle]
103  G:  you big poopoo butthead!
104  A:  poo poo poo (gibberish) um

Example 9 of five year olds is socially subtler. Several children are playing telephone and whispering. They express concern about whether the target, the teaching assistant, can hear a shared insult in which her body is the target of criticism. Especially when the target is an adult, whether she can be teased face to face depends on your relationship. The teaching assistant is a very large woman, and her body attracts their comment, but she is playful, and does a lot of teasing herself. Here we have a discussion by three five-year-old girls about whether to keep secret their comment about her.

(9)
178  [whispering in telephone]
179> M:  {{pp}Emily has an elephant on her butt}{laughs}
180  L:  did you hear that?  #to Emily#

---

6 Translated by Victor Gonzalez and coded by Rosa Lutrario.
This kind of humor develops in two directions. One is the easy one towards outside targets, where humor is a vehicle of shared perspectives on absent or distant persons. This can be a useful basis for expressing joint norms and attitudes that are the stuff of friendship. A lot of folklore research examines joking about shared targets. But humor is not funny unless you share values. In example ten there are ten-year-old girls criticizing a classmate's clothes. We have a lot like this from the ten-year-olds in the working class school, who gossip mercilessly and joyfully about bodies, clothes, tastes, dating, and behavior of all kinds.

(10)

169 M: t:  que feo se viste Ramon
e:  see how ugly Ramon dresses
170 A: t:  yeah donde esta
e:  yeah, where is he?
171 M: t:  alli=   palla  =
e:  over there
172 A: t:  =(a de veras)=
e:  ah its true
173 t:  mira los zapatos que trae
e:  look at the shoes he's wearing
174 [both laugh]
175 t:  (ye:up)

What is subtler and more complex is the evolution of humor directed towards a conversational partner, what we call ribbing or teasing. While there is funny name-calling by young children, teasing about the other's individual behavior or attributes doesn't appear as early. It increases and becomes a very important component of adult talk of friends. We found with adults there can be significant increases of teasing between people who are alike in gender and probably ethnicity or other similarities. You might think this is because being close gives you the liberty of teasing and of using reverse-valued epithets. Teasing can be a significant boost to friendship. But it requires intimacy. At a gay party, a friend was overheard saying to another guest, "You can't call me faggot because you don't know me well enough." The same can be said of nigger. These can be called reverse-valued or flip-flop epithets because they are insults to non-friends and intimacy markers to friends.

Translated by Elizabeth Keating and coded by Rosa Lutrario.
Is it just that these epithets and teasing are an allusion to being insiders, to being intimate? No, it turns out that even when mutual teasing is experimentally and deliberately produced, it increases felt solidarity in groups (Keltner, Capps et al. 2001). So teasing and solidarity go together, at least for existent groups, and when evenly distributed.

We have friendly teasing by seven.

(11)  
247 S: t: i (see) {[sp pronunc] a Marcella muy fea}  
  e: i see a very ugly Marcella
248 E: t: [laugh] i (see) big Sonia *muy flaca  
  e: i see big, *very skinny Sonia

As with adults, teasing was usually marked by laughter, continuation of a humorous key, and/or exaggeration, to make clear that the accusations are not serious.  

Teasing is culturally variable however. In our data, children in the working class school, where children were from many countries and races, teased the other child about three times as often as the middle class parochial school children. No wonder teasing has been such an object of attention from anthropologists. The cultural milieu of stimulation is crucial to the development of skills in interaction. Studies in a number of settings of early language development have pointed out that teasing is a stronger component in some social groups than in others.

Humor targeting the speaker

The third kind of attack humor is joking about oneself. In the adult women’s conversations with each other we have examined, women tell humorous stories or wisecracks in over thirteen percent of the turns. In single-sex groups women joke about themselves more than men do. In women’s sociable talk with each other in our adult samples 27% of the humor was self-deprecating confessional humor about the speaker, and a fifth of the male humor was directed to the self. More of the male humor was a fantasy rather than realistic, however (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp in press). We looked for this pattern in children. There was very little self-targeted humor, the totals for each age subgroup being no greater than 7%. We have brought together some good examples to show what this kind of humor is like, and how ambiguous these child examples can be. In example 12 from seven-year-olds, there is sharing of secrets about the fathers. These could be seen as joking about fathers, but there is also a shared confessional element because it is the family of each that is involved.

(12)  
231 J: t: y tu dijistes que no =celebrabas=  
  e: and you said you did not celebrate it
  #Christmas#
232  
233 I: t: pero que importa algunos no celebran/  
  e: that doesn’t matter, not everyone celebrates it

\*Note that in some standard format or ritualized teasing, such as the dozens, it is a rule that it cannot imply literal truth, and can provoke fights otherwise. Teasing is risky (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp in press).
234  t: [laugh]
e: but yours
235  t: {[laugh] pero y tus}
e: pero y tus
236  t: [laugh]
e: but yours
237  J: t: {{singing} #I# #I# #I# I eres una changita}
e: you are little monkey
238  [both giggle]
239  I: t: ira ("mira")
e: look
240  t: mi papa
e: my dad
241  t: tambien bebe
e: he drinks too
242  t: pero a mi mama no le =gusta/ =
e: and my mom does not like that
243  J: t: =(ay basta)=
e: oh stop it
244  J: t: {{f}que::?}
e: what?
245  I: t: que mi::
e: that my
246  t: que mi papa bebe
e: that my dad drinks
247  t: y a mi mama no le gusta/
e: and my mom does not like that
248  J: t: si?
e: yeah
249  I: t: no le gusta a mi mama/
e: my mom does not like that
250  t: mi mama se enoja
e: my mom gets mad
251  t: un =dia tuvo que dormir=
e: one day she had to sleep
252  J: t: =mi papa=
e: my dad
253  t: mi papa no va a la iglesia/
e: my dad does not go to church
254  I: t: mi papa tampoco//
e: my dad does not go either
255  t: <5> [laugh]

Reyes W7F5

It is not clear whether reports of naughty behavior are confessions or boasts, like this seven year olds' remarks about going to see the principal.

(13)
39. W: yeah i go to see them cause
40. i did {{laugh}something bad/}
>41. i went to Ms. Thurmond **five times

9 Translated by Reynalda Martel and coded by Marybel Robledo.
The laughter is not distinct for reports on bad behavior or on odd appearance, so there is no internal evidence as to when laughter is due to boasting. A seven year old girl also describes her history as a troublemaker at home. The element of pride in these achievements may be common to other examples of self-revealing humor.

(14)
400T: i broke oh a {laughing} glass ball that was
401 in mom's-} that she got from her great-grandmother?
402K: Terry!
403T: that was (dead)/
404 i broke my own dolphin?
405K: okay/
406T: um...i pulled out the chord on purpose
407 when Jack was on the internet?
408 [both laugh]
409T: um i've done that about three times/

At ten, three boys exchange advice from common bad experiences.

(15)
124 A:  remember when we - did you ever call a girl
125       a "b" word?
126 J:  you'd be calling them a female dog/
127 T:  =last time i did.=
>128 J:  =know *why..because i got *popped/= [boys chuckle]
129 T:  =*oh=*
130 A:  =cause it *hurt *too=/

We also found a clearly complex discussion about death. These ten-year-old girls, thinking about death, back off from a serious topic by a comical wisecrack. They avoided a somber topic by a sudden switched ending that could lighten the mood.

(16)
188 C:  t:  Maria que harias que yo me muriera/
189        e: Maria what would you do if i died
190 t:  que..que haria/
191        e: what..what would you do
192 M:  t:  no se/
193        e: i don't know
193 C:  t:  yo no haria una fiesta/
193        e: i wouldn't have a party
So this kind of joking about oneself is rare in the pre-adolescent children we observed. According to some studies of westernized cultures, it emerges in adolescents, as a way of talking about emerging values concerning the self. Lampert (1996) noticed there was the onset of gender differences in this type of humor by ten.

**Stylistic marking of perspective shifts**

Finally, adult humorous narratives can involve variation of language style to mark perspective shifts. Children do start very young using style to mark roles, but we only see evidence of perspective contrast in some of the ten-year-old samples.

The children did a lot of copying of what they had seen in media or heard in CDs, displaying hours spent listening to rappers and to TV programs.

Example 17. Some ten year olds doing a Spanish TV station. This is only one of several episodes doing news, sports and a soap opera:

(17)

048S: t: {[shift in register] noticias *catorce de nuevo}
  e: once again, channel 14 news
049  t: *univision...nos
  e: (Spanish tv station) we are...
050C: t: =={[hi] luz(**c::la::ri::ta)}?
     #mexican soap opera#
>052S: t: se esta muriendo dos personas aqui en mi lado..
  e: two people are dying next to me
>053  t: {[ac] tiene algo que *decir senor}/
  e: sir, do you have something to say?
>054C: t: {[hi+slurred+f] no mi *hija se va (morir) ( )}? 
  e: no, my daughter is going to die.
055S: t: ==no..*pero no me =jale asi senor=/
  e: no, sir don’t pull at me like that.
056C: t: ya..ya..*calmense ={[sound of pain]}=
  e: stop stop, calm down
057S: t: {[ac] ya..ya..ya, (xxx jale)}
  e: stop, stop, stop

Note that in this enactment, the two children shift roles, each contributing to the two perspectives of the announcer and the "witness". In line 54 and 56 C plays the suffering parent, but in 55,56, and 57 both C and S enact the announcer trying to calm the parent. The children see the enactment of roles as a target to which both can contribute.

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Translated by Victor Gonzalez and coded by Diana Huerta.
In another case, we hear the voice and perspective of a series of courtroom actors. The complexity here is to provide a jury, a judge, a plaintiff (here called witness), the accused, and the lawyers. We hear all their voices and perspectives although there are only two children.

(18)
1 E: i'll be the *jury. here.. i'll be the *jury.
2 L: this court will *now *come *to *order. [laugh]

37 L: you may take your seat *now. [laugh]
38 this court will now come to order. [laugh]
39 you may make your opening statement.
40 E: your honor.. my first-
41 my first defense will be the witness........

55 E: Mary.. can you tell us what absolutely happened?
56 E: well..um.. i was at home and
      i was feeling lonely and i...
57 L: what did you do.. *rape that *man? [laugh]
58 E: and i wanted my boyfriend to come and
      i didn't think he would force me
59 to have sex with him so i told him no.
60 L: *sshhh. *no. you cannot use that word
      in this court. [laugh]
61
62 E: he wanted to do the wild thing.
63 L: [laugh]
64 E: but i said i didn't want to.. i was (married).
65 he slapped me and he punched me in my face.
      [mock crying]

81 L: well.. why are you pressing charge for rape?
      [laugh] <2>
82 E: he.. uh.. he.. *yeah. he *forced me to.
83 L: he forced you but-but that is called
      sexual harassment..
84 but did you press charge for that?
85 E: yes.
86 L: *no. you pressed charge for rape..
      which he did not do so.. [laugh]


We could argue as to whether the legal terminology is doing more than marking the occupation of judge or lawyer as opposed to citizen witness or plaintiff, but the dialogue makes clear that the view of the story is different for the two roles.

This contrast is made in another role playing segment by ten year old bilingual girls. In our study, we sampled scientific register by providing a lot of magnets, compasses and related material and workbook questions. Seeing magnets repel each other led the girls to dramatic play, with language shift representing the scientific animator vs the magnets speaking.
The evolution of adult skills in children's conversation, as we see it from the vantage point of their humorous interaction, involves five major changes:

∑ Mimicry and role-playing can be seen from the time the children are three.

∑ Humorous solo narratives begin to occur by the time they are seven, though it is still easier to do narrative joking through role-play at ten.

∑ There is a radical drop in topics from the immediate context to shared social topics by the time the children are ten.

∑ Children mark perspective shifts by language shifts by ten.

∑ There is teasing by five that becomes a major feature in some cultural groups by ten, protected by the speaker's laughter and exaggeration.

∑ But there is no sign by ten that self-revelation is yet an important source of conversational humor in these pre-adolescent children.

Changes in humorous discourse may reflect similar changes elsewhere in conversational behavior. On the other hand, it may be more difficult to accomplish these feats with humor. To anthropologists, this is a reminder that the stage of development of children is crucial to what they can do, whatever the cultural setting.

References


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11 Translated by Claudia Villareal and coded by Diana Huerta.


