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AUTHOR Kuo, Sai-hua
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated verbal play, including teasing and self-mocking in a naturally occurring conversation, among four Chinese female friends. The study illustrates how these speakers engage in teasing activities and then discusses the implications and significance of verbal play. Examples are taken from a casual, playful conversation participated in and taped in the summer of 1990 during a 2-hour lunch at a restaurant in Tapei, Taiwan. A recurrent topic for teasing is the speech style of two of the participants. Some of the teasing is rude and face-threatening. The four women repeatedly mocked themselves or playfully put others down. The target of teasing tended to agree or even elaborate when being degraded. In an informal conversation, participants who are intimate and share common history with one another tend to share the same "interactive frame." Speech acts that are intrinsically face-threatening can be offered and received as "play." Women can be the initiators as well as the receivers of humor. It is concluded that communicative strategies should be interpreted in terms of interactive frame rather than gender or politeness considerations. (Contains 16 references.) (CK)

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Verbal playfulness as a rapport-building strategy
in conversation among Chinese female friends

Sai-hua Kuo
Department of Foreign Languages
National Tsing Hua University

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1. Introduction

Although humor is an ordinary, everyday activity, humorous behaviors like teasing or joking have not been a frequent topic of research. Most of the sociolinguistic research on teasing has focused on adult-child interaction where teasing has been found to serve various social functions. For instance, Schieffelin's (1986) study of teasing and shaming in Kaluli children's interactions has found that in egalitarian cultures, teasing is a way to teach social norms and is often preferred to more authoritarian methods. Miller (1986) observes that some white working-class parents in the United States view teasing as a way to teach children how to defend themselves and control their hurt feelings. In general, teasing has been considered an important speech activity in the process of children's language socialization.

Eder (1988) adopts an ethnographic and sociolinguistic approach to examine teasing activities among American adolescent females. She has found that teasing is a way for females to strengthen social bonds through shared enjoyment and it gives females an opportunity to play with language and develop creative and novel responses. In addition, teasing allows adolescents to experiment with and explore their own notions of gender roles.

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Drew's (1987) study of teasing among adults is based on data from natural conversations among people who are familiar with one another. In the course of his analysis, Drew shows how teases can be considered as part of, and as marking a critical contribution to, conversational sequences involving both humorous and serious components. In this study, teases are typically produced as humorously signalled responses to a serious conversational turn and are themselves then treated seriously by the initial speaker.

This paper aims to investigate verbal play, including teasing and self-mocking, in a naturally occurring conversation among Chinese female friends. My analysis shows that humorous verbal play, particularly playful self-deprecation or other-denigration, frequently occurs in this casual conversation in which the four female participants are close friends. In the following, I first illustrate how these speakers engage in teasing activities and then discuss the implications and significance of verbal play in the analyzed conversation.

2. Data

The instances of verbal play which are analyzed in this paper are taken from a casual conversation I participated in and taped in the summer of 1990. The other three participants, Yang, Cheng, and Wei, are my best friends. We were high school classmates. Although later we went to different universities and now have quite different careers, our similar personalities, common attitudes, values, and interests have bound us together

closely over the past years. Cheng, an English major, is a high school English teacher; Yang, a psychology major, works for the mental health division of a major hospital; Wei, a finance and banking major, is a bank supervisor; and I myself was then a college teacher on-leave of absence and studying sociolinguistics at Georgetown University.

This two-hour conversation took place when we were having lunch at a restaurant in Taipei. Because I had been abroad, we had not seen one another for a year. We were all very excited about this reunion and were eager to know what had happened to one another during this period. Our enthusiasm and excitement were evidenced by frequent mutual interruption, volunteering information, fast and clipped questions, and quick, expressive responses. The most salient characteristic of this verbal interaction, however, is the frequent exchanges of humorous and playful remarks among the four participants; we repeatedly mocked ourselves or teasingly put others down.

3. Analysis

Overall, the "key" (Goffman 1974; Hymes [1972]/1986) of the conversation is playful and non-serious. In Example (1), both Cheng and Yang show their good sense of humor right after we started our talk.

(1)

- 1 Cheng: Ei, ni dao na bian xue sheme?
Hey you go that side learn what
- 2 Kuo: Shehuiyuyanxue.
Sociolinguistics

- 3 Cheng: Shehuiyuyanxue. xue nage dongxi (chuckles)
Sociolinguistics learn that thing
- 4 Kuo: Suoyi wo xianzai ba nimen jiang de hua lu
So I now BA you say NOM word record
xialai qu fenxi
down go analyze
- >5 Cheng: Aiyo! wode ma ya!
my mother INT
- >6 Hao kepa!
pretty horrible
- 7 Yang: (laughs) Tai kongbu le!
too terrible PRT
- 8 Kuo: Mei you la! Zhi shi litou yexu hui you
not have PRT just is inside perhaps will have some
yixie xianxiang ao,
some phenomenon PRT
- 9 nage yuliao yexu yongde...yihou yongdezha
that data perhaps use afterwards useful
- 10 Yang: Zhende a?
Really PRT
- >11 Cheng: Jianglai yao yanjiu women,
future will research we
- >12 wo gen ni jiang, women cai hui chuming.
I with you talk we then will famous
- >13 Yang: (laughs) Women hui chuming.
we will famous

Translation

- 1 Cheng: Hey, what are you studying there?
- 2 Kuo: Sociolinguistics.
- 3 Cheng: Sociolinguistics. You're studying that! (chuckles)
- 4 Kuo: So I'm recording what you're saying
to analyze it
- >5 Cheng: Oh! Mama mia!
- >6 How horrible!
- >7 Yang: (laughs) It's too terrible!
- 8 Kuo: No, it's just that there may be some feature in it,
9 the data may be use..may be useful in the future.
- 10 Yang: Really?

- >11 Cheng: You do research on us,
--->12 I tell you, we'll be famous.
--->13 Yang: (laughs) We'll be famous!

When I told Cheng that I probably would analyze our conversation, Cheng's immediate response in lines 5 and 6 conveys an exaggerated playfulness in both her lexical items (e.g., "Oh, mama mia!" and "How horrible!") and voice quality. Therefore, she actually is not as frightened as she claims to be. Recognizing Cheng's humor, Yang in the next turn not only laughs but also agrees with Cheng to go along with Cheng's humor. Later, in lines 11 and 12, Cheng even jokingly encourages me to do research on Yang and her speech so that they would be "famous". Again, Yang laughs and repeats what Cheng had said in line 12 to show her agreement.

A recurrent topic for teasing in this conversation is Cheng's and Yang's speech styles. They both speak with what Tannen (1984) calls "high involvement" conversation style, which is characterized by overlapping, loudness, shorter or no pauses between turn taking, and finishing others' sentences. In Example (2), when I make fun of Cheng's fast rate of speech, Yang joins the teasing activity, although she herself is also a fast talker. During the conversation, Cheng mentioned several times that she was bored with her job as a high school English teacher--she has been teaching at the same school for more than ten years. In this teasing episode, she tells us that she wants to quit to become a saleswoman.

(2)

- 1 Cheng: Wo hen xiang gai hang zuo **sales**, ni zhidao ma?
I very want change job do sales, you know PRT
- 2 Wei: Wo didi jiu zuo **sales** de.
my brother just do NOM
- >3 Kuo: Buguo ni sudu..jianghua sudu yao fangman,
but your speed speak speed have to slow down
- >4 buran renjia /?/
otherwise people
- >5 Yang: { Bu mai huoqi jiu lai le,
not buy temper then come PRT
- >6 wo gen ni jiang, maqi renjia lai le.
I with you talk scold people come PRT

Translation

- 1 Cheng: I really want to change my job to sales, you know.
- 2 Wei: My younger brother does sales.
- >3 Kuo: But your speed..you have to slow down your speed of
talking,
- >4 otherwise people /?/
- >5 Yang: { When people don't buy, she loses her
temper,
- >6 I tell you, and starts calling them names.

Since we know that Cheng does not really mean what she says, that she just feels bored but does not really want to change her profession, both Yang and I respond to Cheng's statement in line 1 in a mocking way: while I suggest that Cheng change her way of speaking, Yang further pictures what will happen to Cheng when she becomes a saleswoman in the future. Although Yang's exaggerated description is in contrast to my "sincere" advice, both of us intended to tease Cheng.

Some instances of teasing in this conversation can be very rude and face-threatening since they denigrate or put down the teased. Examples (3) and (4) illustrate this point. Example (3)

is from a part of the conversation when Cheng was explaining to us that although she was a very good student at school, she did not pursue advanced study after graduating from college because she had studied too hard and did not want to suffer from the pressure any more.

(3)

- 1 Cheng: Wo juede wo shi dushu hen renzhen de ren ye!
I think I am study very serious NOM person PRT
- 2 tamen dou bu xiangxin.
they all not believe
- 3 wo tongshi ye bu xiangxin.
my colleague also not believe
- 4 tamen dou renwei wo
they all think I
- >5 Yang: Wo kan ni nianshu jiu xiang
I think you study just like
- ni jianghua zhe yang,
you speak this way
- >6 ni hai neng duo renzhen!
you still can how serious
- 7 Kuo: (laughs) Ni zhi gen..ni genben mei you gen ta
you only with you all not have with she
- tong guo xue,
together ASP study
- 8 ni zemme zhidao?
you how know
- >9 Yang: Keshi wo meici qu nimen ban,
but I every time go your class
- >10 dou kandao ta gen bianren zai jianghua a!
all see she with others are talk PRT
- (laughter)
- >11 Cheng: Wo chuzhong yi nianji..dui dui
I junior high one grade right right

- >12 wo chuzhong yi nianji..laoshi gei wo de
I junior high one grade teach give me NOM
- >13 pingyu,
comment
- >14 jiu shi wo tai ai jianghua le! (laughs)
just is I too like speak PRT

Translation

- 1 Cheng: I consider myself very serious about studying.
2 They just don't believe me,
3 my colleagues don't believe me, either.
4 They all think I }
- >5 Yang: I think you studied just like the
way you talk,
--->6 so how serious could you be!?
- 7 Kuo: (laughs, to Yang) You've just been with..You've
never been in the same class with her,
8 so how would you know?
- >9 Yang: But whenever I went to your
--->10 class, I saw her talking to someone!
(laughter)
- >11 Cheng: During the first year when I was in junior high..
--->12 right right..During the first year when I was in
junior high,
--->13 my teacher gave me a comment,
--->14 he thought that I was too talkative (laughs)

What Yang says in lines (5) and (6) can be heard as an insulting challenge to Cheng's claim that she was a very serious student; Yang's "I think you studied just like the way you talk, so how serious could you be!?" indicates that she does not believe Cheng could be serious about studying, judging from the way Cheng speaks. Although Yang's deprecating remarks are delivered in a serious way, I laugh and challenge that Yang would not be able to know whether Cheng was a serious student or not since Yang and Cheng were never in the same class in high school (Yang and I were classmates for the first year and Cheng and I were classmates for the remaining two years when we were senior high

school students). We all recognized that Yang's explanation in lines (9) and (10) "But whenever I went to your class, I saw her talking to someone" is intended to exaggerate Cheng's talkativeness for comic effect and therefore produced loud laughter. Cheng's response in lines (11)-(14), i.e., her teacher also considers her too talkative, indicates that she takes Yang's denigrating remark in a light-hearted way and therefore collaborates with Yang to accomplish the greatest effect of humor.

Yang is in turn denigrated by Cheng in Example (4), which is from a conversation about some of our high school classmates. Yang, who is always very much interested in details of other people's lives and enjoys spying on others, has made the greatest contribution to this topic since she also seems to be the one who remembers things in the past very well.

(4)

- 1 Yang: ..ta xiansheng..nan pengyou jiu shi hen gao
her husband boy friend just is very tall
- 2 hen gao, dui bu dui, wo hai jide. 7
very tall right not right I still remember
- 3 Wei: L Dui.
right
- >4 Yang: Wo naojin jiu shi ji zhexie zhashi
my brain just is remember these trivial thing
- >5 Cheng: Sha shiqing (chuckles). luanqibazhao de shiqing.
silly thing messy NOM thing
- 6 Kuo: Suoyi wo juede Yang jiyili hen hao a!
so I think memory very good PRT
- 7 Yang: Wo jiyili hen hao! wo jiyili hen hao! dui!
my memory very good my memory very good right

- >8 Cheng: Keshi nianshu dou mei jiqilai (chuckles)
but study all not remember
- >9 Yang: Dui. keshi wenti shi nianshu o,
right but problem is study PRT
- 10 Wo zhe ren bijiao neng bei ye,
I this person more can memorize PRT
- 11 wo hai man xihuan bei shu de.
I still very like memorize book NOM

Translation

- 1 Yang: ..Her husband..boyfriend is just very very tall,
2 right? I still remember.
- 3 Wei: Right.
- >4 Yang: My brain just remembers all these trivial things.
- >5 Cheng: Silly things! (chuckles) Messy things!
- 6 Kuo: So I think Yang has a very good memory!
- >7 Yang: My memory is terrific! My memeory is terrific!
right!
- >8 Cheng: But you don't remember things from textbooks!
(laughter)
- 9 Yang: Right. But the problem is studying..
10 I myself am better at memorizing,
11 I used to like memorize things from textbooks.

In line 4 Yang makes a humorous but self-deprecating comment on her memory, "My brain just remembers all these trivial things". Instead of uttering a disagreement with Yang's self-deprecation, which according to Pomerantz (1984) is a preferred second pair-part, Cheng in the next turn builds on Yang's self-mocking to discount what Yang remembers as indeed silly and unworthy things. Later, her remarks in line 8 "But you don't remember things from textbooks!" is an even more serious put-down; that is, Yang has not used her good memory in the right way. Although Yang may recognize Cheng's humorous intent and does not take what Cheng said literally, her response in lines 9-11 shows that she treats Cheng's tease seriously. Her "Right" is preliminary to a

correction and disagreement: She is actually also good at memorizing things from textbooks.

A similar exchange of humor can be found in another teasing episode (not to be presented here) in which Wei jokingly deprecates herself by saying that she does not use her brain much on her job as a bank supervisor. Yang further quips that Wei "only has to add things up" to trivialize her work. Wei, however, treats Yang's tease seriously by explaining that her daily work is not that easy and she also has to know the English used in letters of credit.

Although each of us was teased by others in this conversation, Yang seems to be the main target of teasing. For instance, all three of us have made some playful remarks on Yang's prettiness. In the beginning of the conversation, when Yang told us that she met one of our high school classmates on the street but that the latter did not recognize her, Cheng immediately says, "Probably she didn't recognize you because you've become so pretty!" Much later, when Yang tells us about her problematic relationship with her boss and says that she could not figure out why he always wants to find fault with her, Wei asks her "Isn't it because you're pretty?" Their paralinguistic cues explicitly signal the non-seriousness of those utterances.

We tend to direct our teases toward Yang because she likes to make playful remarks about others in the first place. In addition, she frequently mocks or deprecates herself. Example

(5) illustrate this point.

(5)

- 1 Cheng: Wo yige tongxue jiu zai nimen nali shehui
my one classmate just in you there social
gongzuo chu shangban.
work division work
- 2 Yang: Shei? jiao sheme mingzi?
who call what name
- 3 Cheng: Ge Shulun.
- 4 Yang: (pause, speaks softly) Ni tongxue a?
your classmate PRT
- 5 Cheng: Ni renshi a?
you know PRT
- 6 Yang: Ni tongxue a?
you classmate PRT
- 7 Cheng: Dui!
Right
- >8 Kuo: Gen ta you you chou de, shuobuding.
with her again have hatred NOM perhaps
(Cheng and Wei laugh)
- 9 Yang: Meiyou, meiyou chou, meiyou chou.
no no hatred no hatred
- 10 Buguo wo xiangxin women tongshi xianzai
but I believe we colleague now
meiyouren dui wo you hao yinxiang jiu shi le.
nobody to me have good impression just is PRT
- 11 yinwei women zhuren
because our director
- 12 Cheng: A, ni renshi Ge Shulun shi ma?
Ah you know is PRT
- 13 Yang: Dui, ta gang lai ye, gang lai jingshen ke.
right she just come PRT just come mental health div
- >14 ni buyao gen ta shuo wo.
you not to her say me
- >15 wo mei you hao mingsheng de, duibuqi a!

- I not have good reputation NOM sorry PRT
(Wei chuckles)
- 16 Cheng: Na ta mingsheng hao bu hao?
then she reputation good not good
- 17 Yang: Ta mei sheme hao bu hao,
she not what good not good
- 18 jinzhangxixi de, hen renzhen de yangzi.
nervous NOM very serious NOM style
- >19 Kuo: Hen renzhen de gen Yang bu tong lei de la!
very serious NOM with not same type NOM PRT
- 20 Yang: Bu tong lei. Ranzhou mei ci....
not same type then every time

Translation

- 1 Cheng: One of my old classmates is working at the Social Work Division of your hospital.
- 2 Yang: Who? What's her name?
- 3 Cheng: Ge Shulun.
- 4 Yang: (pauses, speaks softly) Your classmate?
- 5 Cheng: You know her?
- 6 Yang: } Your classmate? }
- 7 Cheng: } Right! }
- >8 Kuo: Another enemy of hers, perhaps.
(Cheng and Wei laugh)
- 9 Yang: No, she's not my enemy, not my enemy.
- 10 But I believe none of my colleagues have a good impression of me,
- 11 because our director }
- 12 Cheng: } Ah! You know Ge Shulun, do you?
- 13 Yang: Right! She just came, just came to the Mental Health Division.
- >14 Don't mention my name to her.
- >15 I don't have a good reputation, I'm sorry!
(Wei chuckles)
- 16 Cheng: Does she have a good reputation?
- 17 Yang: Nothing good or bad about her.
- 18 She looks nervous, very serious-like.
- >19 Kuo: A serious type is not Yang's type! (laughs)
- 20 Yang: Not my type! And whenever....

The above segment of conversation can be considered "gossip" about Cheng's former classmate who happens to be Yang's new colleague. After Cheng tells Yang her classmate's name, Yang's

reaction in line (4) draws my attention. Yang, who always shows her high involvement conversational style by interrupting or latching onto other's turn, asking "machine-gun" questions, giving quick expressive responses, suddenly hesitates and lowers her voice. She repeats her question "Your classmate?" in line (6), although the question itself is redundant since Cheng has made it clear that the woman was her classmate. Previous to this conversation, Yang told us about her problematic relationship with her colleagues, i.e., she did not speak to half of her female colleagues at her office. Noticing that there is something wrong there, I tease Yang in line (8) "Another of her enemies, perhaps", to prompt her to tell us what really happened between her and Cheng's friend. Cheng and Wei display their recognition of my teasing intent by laughing. Although Yang repeatedly denies my speculation in line (9), she admits that most of her colleagues have a bad impression of her and blames this on her boss, the director of the mental health division.

Yang's response in lines (13)-(15) is particularly interesting. She first seriously asks Cheng not to mention her name to Cheng's classmate for she does not have a good reputation; however, the seriousness is much diluted by the final "I'm sorry!" Yang's playful tone conveys that she is not really as worried about or as bothered by her bad reputation as she seems to be. In lines (17)-(18), Yang negatively characterizes Cheng's classmate as serious and nervous. Since Yang herself, as she previously told us, is always "out running around", I tease

her again in line (19) by saying, "A serious type is not Yang's type!", which is confirmed by Yang.

In this example, I address Cheng and Wei, although the tease is directed to Yang. For instance, I said to Cheng and Wei, "Another of her enemies, perhaps", rather than asking Yang, "Is she another of your enemies?"; I said "A serious type is not Yang's type!" instead of "A serious type is not your type!". This indirect teasing strategy creates the greatest involvement in my audience: While Cheng and Wei laugh as I have anticipated, Yang also responds by either refuting or confirming my previous statement.

4. Discussion

As my analysis shows, the four participants in the analyzed conversation repeatedly mocked themselves or playfully put others down. In addition, it was found that the target of teasing tended to agree or even elaborate when being degraded and therefore jointly produced the playful act with the teaser. Likewise, when a speaker mocked or deprecated herself, her interlocutors laughed rather than disagreed with her self-deprecation (cf. Pomerantz 1984). Despite the fact that recipients of a tease in this conversation sometimes responded quite seriously to the teasing proposal, this type of "po-faced" response, as Drew (1987) has suggested, does not necessarily indicate that the recipient fails to recognize the non-seriousness of the teasing remark.

Teasing is a category of what Brown and Levinson (1987) call

"face-threatening acts" (FTAs) since it may offend or embarrass the recipient's positive face and therefore create tension in verbal interactions. Self-mocking, on the other hand, is face-threatening to speakers in that they disclose their own weaknesses and positions themselves one-down to others.

Many studies of gender difference in conversation (e.g., Lakoff 1975; Aries 1975) have characterized women's speech as polite or affiliative, and various forms of verbal aggression such as challenges, put-downs, and insults are considered features of men's speech. Therefore, we may wonder why those four female speakers in the analyzed conversation enjoy teasing others or mocking themselves.

There have been many studies on the positive effect of verbal play on interpersonal relationships. Tannen (1986) claims that joking, as a way of saying one thing and meaning another, has both defensive and rapport pay-offs. While the defensive benefit is in the ability to retreat: "I was only joking", the rapport benefit lies in the sensual pleasure of shared laughter as well as the evidence of rapport in having matching senses of humor. Similarly, Attardo's (1993) study of the paradox of the communicative nature of jokes also points out that humor has two general functions in social and interpersonal perspectives. The basis of the decommitment function is that humorous communication is retractable, i.e., the speakers may back off from their utterance without loss of "face". In this sense, the decommitment function is the same as Tannen's defensive benefit. On the other

hand, the group identification function of humor, similar to Tannen's rapport benefit, is that humor operates as a group-defining element, that is, those who laugh together share intimacy, and those who don't are rejected by the group.

The rapport or group identification function of verbal play has also been discussed in the realm of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) consider joking a good example of socially acceptable rudeness as well as a basic positive-politeness strategy. They claimed that in intimate relations there may be presumed to be minimal danger of face threats. This gives rise to the use of bald-on-record insults or jokes as a way of asserting such intimacy. Hence we get conventionalized or ritualized insults as a mechanism for stressing solidarity. Leech (1983) also posits that banter is an offensive way of being friendly (mock-impoliteness). He further points out that lack of politeness in itself can become a sign of intimacy, and therefore the ability to be impolite to someone in jest helps to establish and maintain such a familiar relationship.

Finally, joking or teasing activity can be best explained by Bateson's (1972) notion of "frame", particularly his distinction between "message" and "metamessage". Bateson claims that "frame is metacommunicative" (p. 188), that is, it conveys information about how the communication is meant, including the relationship among speakers, their attitudes toward one another and what they are saying and doing. In other words, no message can be interpreted without reference to a metamessage about the frame.

Play, for example, is a frame within which a bite or a slap is not hostile. The metamessage "this is play" signals the context within which a bite or a slap does not stand for what it is ordinarily known to mean, namely, aggression. Teases are recognizable as humorous because they are constructed with certain distinctive features which serve as signals of the speaker's humorous intent and as cues that the apparent message should not be taken literally. Owing to the intimacy and the shared interpretation of what Gumperz (1982) calls "contextualization cues", such as prosody, lexical or syntactical choices, the four participants in the analyzed conversation recognize the shift of the frame and take up appropriate footings. In a joking or teasing activity, the teller and the recipient work together to establish and sustain the operation of the "play" frame and to accomplish the proper performance and acknowledgement of the joke. It is presumably this active collaboration in the interpretative work required by humor that produces the unusually demonstrative kind of social involvement among groups of joking people.

In summary, it may be concluded that the introduction of verbal play, particularly playful self-deprecation or other-denigration found in the talk I analyzed, can be an index of intimacy. As my analysis shows, in an informal conversation, participants who are intimate and share common history with one another tend to share the same "interactive frame". Speech acts that are intrinsically face-threatening can be offered and

received as "play" and therefore become an agreeable diversion and a source of enjoyment which finds expression in collective laughter. Moreover, my analysis also shows that women can be the initiators as well as the receivers of humor, which sometimes is expressed in the form of verbal aggression. Therefore, I suggest that linguistic features or communicative strategies should be understood or interpreted in terms of interactive frame rather than gender or politeness considerations.

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