Non-serious Teasing in Multi-Party Face-to-Face Interactions

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Teasing, a vehicle usually accomplished through denigrating or ridiculing others, has been the object of a considerable amount of research. In this paper, we tend to delve into two non-serious teasing, specifically, jocular mockery and jocular flattery: One occurs through diminishing something of relevance and the other occurs by elevating others. This paper adopts the methodology of conversational analysis from pragmatics, aiming to disclose how these two forms of non-serious teasing are interactionally accomplished. The current study focuses on the context of multi-party face-to-face interactions in two renowned Chinese reality shows, in a bid to contribute to the current teasing research across various sociocultural contexts. The main concerns of the research are mainly around three respects: what occasions jocular mockery and jocular flattery respectively; what are the similarities and differences of these two forms; what functions can these two kinds achieve.

Keywords: non-serious teasing, jocular flattery, jocular mockery, reality shows

Introduction

Teasing occurs widely and frequently in diverse communicative settings. It has been taken as the object of an enormous amount of research in which most studies have focused on examining the functions of teasing in different contexts. Previous research has stated that, teasing can be utilized to criticize others or make complaints (Haugh, 2014). It can be used to promote interactional rapport and affiliation (Haugh, 2010). Besides, teasing can be adopted as a way of asserting status and power as well (Partington, 2008).

Studies to date have analysed different kinds of teasing practices in a wide range of settings of which mainly are daily settings. However, studies of teasing occur in broadcast settings; particularly, in reality shows are rare. In addition, there are studies about jocular flattery and jocular mockery respectively; yet research involving comparison between these two non-serious teasing is hardly seen. Therefore, the current study attempts to extend the research of teasing to a wider field, and furthermore, to conclude the similarities and differences of these two forms and the functions these teasing exerted.

Jocular Mockery and Jocular Flattery

Haugh (2017, p. 206) has claimed that teasing involves seemingly contradictory serious and non-serious elements. Serious elements of teasing diminish others through provocative remarks while non-serious teasing tends to be playful and jocular. Jocular mockery and jocular flattery are two forms of non-serious teasing that take place in a playful and jocular context.

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Jocular flattery, unlike traditional types of teasing, is mainly accomplished through elevating others. It involves a positive evaluation of others which is usually incongruent with the actual condition. As for jocular mockery, it is a social action in which the speaker diminishes or denigrates something of relevance within a playful and non-serious frame.

Instances of both jocular flattery and jocular mockery were collected from two well-known Chinese reality shows, Back to Field and 50 KM Taohuawu. Back to Field is a show in which the hosts and the guests, all are celebrities, go back living in a village, and take charge of some farm work together. 50 KM Taohuawu is a show in which 15 celebrities live together and make joint efforts to build an ideal community on the outskirts Taohuawu. The reasons for choosing these two reality shows lie in following two respects. On the one hand, these two programs owe similar purposes and themes, that is, focusing on social life and group living. As a consequence, instances of multi-party face-to-face interactions are copious and easy to collect. On the other hand, compared to other variety shows which may have scripts and well-designed characters, these two shows are relatively true and can reflect real social interactions. A total of 20 non-serious teasing instances (10 instances of jocular flattery and 10 instances of jocular mockery) were collected from the above two programs.

In regard with the analytical method of this research, conversational analysis, mainly turns-taking analysis was adopted. Through analysing turns of the collected clips, we aimed to achieve following two aspects: to figure out what triggers the jocular flattery or jocular mockery and to delve into the function of utilizing the non-serious teasing.

Triggers of Jocular Flattery and Jocular Mockery

Triggers of non-serious teasing usually involve making howlers inadvertently, making some moral transgressions, having some relevant remarks with the relational history of the target or some humorous response to the prior turn. Based on related studies, there are mainly two types of triggers: (1) overdone acts; (2) unfulfilled acts.

Triggers of Jocular Flattery

Overdone acts. The following example of overdone act was taken from 50KM Taohuawu and in this instance, jocular flattery was occasioned by one of the interactants, Zhang, who belittled his own achievements.

1. Song   Do you have any representative work?
2. Zhang   Nothing to speak of.
3. Song   Say the most popular one.
4. Zhang   Nothing particularly popular.
5. Wang   Many of them are popular. I have watched a lot of his TV dramas.
6. Meng   Exactly. The ratings of his TV drama were always high.
7. Song   Really? That is amazing!

The above TV clip started with a question raised by Song who wanted to begin talks through questioning about Zhang's representative work. Yet Zhang did not simply offer a clear answer but instead, gave an over-modest response of which kind of made Song embarrassed. In an attempt to continue the talk, Wang and Meng made some jocular flattery by giving compliments about Zhang's achievements even though they might have not watched any TV drama starred by Zhang at all. It was the jocular flattery made by them that helped to

ease the atmosphere and make them continue the talk. In this case, the jocular flattery was occasioned by Zhang's over-modest acts.

Unfulfilled acts. Unfulfilled acts can also trigger jocular flattery. When the target fails to finish some tasks, he or she would save himself or herself from the situation by saying something decent. The following example was from Back to Field and the jocular flattery was occasioned by Li, who is unwilling to finish his assignment.

1. Huang	Everyone has his own task. I will take in charge of cooking. How about you?
2. He	Peng and I will go to catch some fish.
3. Li	How about me? Seems that there is no other work to do.
4. Huang	What about going to the chicken coop and get some eggs?
5. Li	What's delicious about eggs. No bother getting them.
6. Huang	Li has eaten different kinds of costly food. Eggs are not to his liking any more.

The above TV clip began with Huang's suggestion that everyone take some tasks to do. He and Zhang had offered to catch some fish and dig some vegetables. However, Li was unwilling to do anything and after Huang advised him to get some eggs, he refused by claiming that eggs were not delicious which was obviously an excuse for avoiding working. Having understood this, Huang made the jocular flattery by deliberately saying that Li had tasted so much delicious food that eggs were not in his eyes anymore. It was the unfulfilled act by Li's refusal to get some eggs that led to Huang's jocular flattery.

Triggers of Jocular Mockery

Given the previous studies, there are two types of triggers of jocular mockery: (1) overdone acts; (2) actions of slip-ups. And the target might be the speaker himself or herself, a co-present audience or a third-party who is not present.

Overdone acts. Instances of overdone acts include actions like extolling or boasting as well as overdone compliments or overly earnest about something. The following clip was from 50KM Taohuawu and the jocular mockery was triggered by speaker's overly boasting.

1. Staff	Who do you think is the most indispensable person in Taohuawu?
2. Meng	Me certainly!
3. Guo	How dare you. Why?
4. Meng	Because I have brought joy to everyone! Isn't it indispensable?
5. Guo	Although you can't cook nor do chores.
6. Wang	Nor make some substantial contributions.
7. Song	Don't say like that. Happiness is certainly the most indispensable.
8. Meng	That's right.

The clip began with a question raised by the staff. Meng answered to the question by boasting herself overly, insisting that she was the most indispensable person among the group. Her remarks showed no respect towards other distinguished guests, who were either older than her or made more contributions to the group. Though might being a joke without any malignant intention, these words were easy to make other audiences uncomfortable. In response, Guo and Wang made some jocular mockery of her, joking on her and thinking her no good, in a bid to ease the awkwardness.

Actions of slip-ups. Actions of slip-ups can also trigger jocular mockery when the speaker exploits some forms of imitation or some weak spots in the prior turn. The following excerpt was from Back to Field where a slip-up of calling someone a wrong name triggered jocular mockery.

1. Huang	Peng, please trim some vegetables for cooking. Peng, do you hear me? Peng?
2. He	He might not hear it.
3. Huang	Eddie Peng!
4. Peng	Here!
5. He	Haha. Now he heard it.
6. Huang	Peng might think that he will be handsome once being called Eddie Peng. Then let's satisfy his wish and let him be a handsome guy temporarily.

In this instance, the jocular mockery was occasioned by Huang's split up. He wrongly called Peng the name of a prominent actor Eddie Peng who was handsome and in good shape. Peng's instant response about admitting himself being Eddie Peng gave rise to Huang's jocular mockery. Huang's remarks were just the jocular mockery, having no bad intention but just making fun of Peng and meanwhile amusing other audiences.

Discussions & Conclusions

Jocular flattery and jocular mockery are two forms of teasing that occur in a non-serious or playful frame. Their connotations are totally different; one is accomplished through elevating others while the other is through diminishing something of relevance. Based on the above analysis about some typical instances of jocular flattery and jocular mockery, it is well attested that overdone actions are able to occasion both jocular flattery and jocular mockery, demonstrating that jocular flattery and jocular mockery have some similarities.

In regard with their different triggering mechanism in greater parts, the differences of these two forms of non-serious teasing are much evident. Jocular flattery can be occasioned by unfulfilled actions while jocular mockery tends to be triggered by split-ups.

In a broad sense, teasing is accomplished through denigrating or diminishing others that it is undoubtedly a threat to the relationship of those interactants. However, non-serious teasing, in this paper, jocular flattery and jocular mockery, exert a positive impact on people's relationship and could be evaluated as supportive as well. According to the above analysis, jocular flattery and jocular mockery both improve solidarity among individuals and group rapport. The most frequent function of non-serious teasing and the greatest influence of them are being utilized as a way to defuse the awkward situation and ease the embarrassed atmosphere.

There are more to be done to refine and further the research. First of all, the dataset being collected in this study is rather limited. And besides, the similarities and differences of the occasioning of these two forms of teasing are not comprehensive to reflect every respect. And what's more, research on the comparison between jocular flattery and jocular mockery is rare and there are a lot more to be done. Nevertheless, this paper has expanded research on teasing to Chinese reality shows which can contribute to the growing body of teasing research. And in addition, this research has made some attempts in the comparative study which might sheds light on further studies as well.

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