

## HILLARY CLINTON'S LAUGHTER IN MEDIA INTERVIEWS<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Laughter in dialogue has been researched under the aegis of many different disciplines. The present approach is psycholinguistic, but with some reliance on recent research in phonetics and conversation analysis (CA). A corpus of laughter from four TV and two radio interviews of Hillary Clinton was analyzed by means of the PRAAT software ([www.praat.org](http://www.praat.org)) for acoustic measurements. All the interviews had taken place in the several weeks immediately following the publication of her memoirs *Living history* (2003). The results showed that her laughter was concentrated mostly during the speech of the interviewers rather than during her own speech, and in the TV rather than in the radio interviews. The most frequent topic of her laughter concerned her own presidential candidacy rather than the historical contents of her book. The strong punctuation effect (Provine 1993, 2000), i.e., the claim that laughter occurs only during the pauses after phrases and sentences, was not confirmed; instead laughter occurred most frequently as a sort of back channeling on the part of the auditor. Contrary to the claim of Clayman and Heritage (2002) that media interviewers maintain a professional neutralism, interviewers in this corpus manifested their personal perspectives by laughing. These findings are discussed in light of current empirical research and in terms of a theory of perspectivity that conceptualizes laughter both in general and more specifically in media interviews as a nonverbal expression of personal perspective.

**Keywords:** Laughter, Media interviews, Dialogue, Perspectivity.

### 1. Introduction

A millenium and a half ago, St. Augustine of Hippo (397/1961: 275 ff.) was quite convinced that he understood the concept of time - until he was asked to define it. One's experience with the concept of laughter might be quite similar today. We all identify instances of laughter perceptually without much reflection. But what is it - acoustically, psychologically, socially, anthropologically, culturally, intentionally, neuromotorically?

There are indeed various scientific approaches to the investigation of laughter. Provine (2000: 43) described laughter psychologically as "the quintessential human social signal" and went on to state that laughter "is about relationships", thus emphasizing the dialogical character of laughter. By contrast, Glenn (2003: 14)

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. We also wish to dedicate this publication to Mary Virginia Sabin, who knew well how to laugh and make others laugh. She died as we were making the final revisions to this ms. Her life has been an inspiration to us both.

insisted: "It is both a solitary and a group form of expression." A more specific definition, but within the CA tradition along with Glenn, was given by Hopper (1992: 179): "Laughter is a sort of involuntary, vocal exhalation that signals amusement, farce, or the unexpected." In his analyses of "shared laughter" in telephone conversations, Hopper also pinpointed its dialogical character, much as Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1984: 18) had emphasized earlier: "Laughter is a socially organized activity." From the phonetician's perspective, Trouvain (2003: 2793) described laughter as "an every-day, human-specific, affective, nonverbal vocalization." Although this description is quite accurate, it applies to weeping with equal accuracy. It also leaves us cold – and, as phonetic lay persons, uninformed.

And yet, a number of phoneticians like Trouvain are currently doing the spadework for other disciplines to prepare us for our psychological or sociological research on laughter. Indeed, from primatology to aesthetics, laughter has proven itself thoroughly interdisciplinary in its appeal. From the point of view of the psychologist, it comes embedded in social, developmental, psycholinguistic, personality, gender, and many other areas of research, although both theorizing and the engagement of empirical research continue to be neglected. Laughter was engaged quite early in Germany in the context of physiological psychology (Hecker 1873), as William James (1890/1981: 1093) himself noted. And in America, G. Stanley Hall (Hall & Allin 1897) took up laughter in conjunction with tickling and the comic. The concern about laughter from a sociological CA point of view is a more recent phenomenon. Thus, according to Psathas (1979: 79): "Prior to Jefferson [no date, 1974, 1979], no studies of the organization of laughter in interaction can be found in the literature."

To return to psycholinguistics, despite the early beginnings, psychology still knows very little about how laughter "functions to elicit emotional responses in listeners and thereby shape their subsequent behavior" (Bachorowski, Smoski, & Owens 2001: 1595). As phoneticians, Bachorowski et al. have assured us that our empirical knowledge about laughter is very sparse and that it is a very complex behavior, not nearly as stereotyped as had been thought by Provine (1996). They too, like ourselves, had to begin their investigation with the acceptance of laughter as "any perceptibly audible sound that an ordinary person would characterize as a laugh if heard under ordinary everyday circumstances" (Bachorowski et al. 2001: 1582). Accordingly, laughter includes, in addition to the "song-like", a wide variety of "snort-like" and "grunt-like" types (Trouvain 2003: 2794). But despite the animalistic tone of the "grunt-like", we still reserve the domain of laughter to the social behavior of humans and do not refer to either birdsong or piglets' grunts as laughter – except perhaps in our most Walt-Disney moments (cf. Darwin 1872/1998; see also Provine 2000: 2, on laughter in apes).

Standard psycholinguistic texts generally ignore the phenomenon of laughter (e.g., Carroll 2003; Harley 2001). Over the years, however, there have been a number of studies that did take laughter into account. Duncan and Fiske (1977), for example, studied laughter in their book *Face-to-face interaction*. They found that auditors laughed less than speakers and men less than women (79; see also Provine 2000: 3; for gender differences see also O'Connell & Kowal 1998: 555 f.), and that overall "a laugh was a fairly rare event" (80) in their data. More recently, Provine (2000; see also Ruch & Ekman 2001) has reviewed the psychological research tradition, and Glenn (2003: 2)

has provided a “comprehensive review of CA research on laughter, from the 1970s to the present”. Provine (2000: 21) has noted a relationship that pinpoints for our own research purposes the dependence of laughter on orality rather than on literacy:

In the primal panting laughter of chimpanzees. . . . We also learn why tickling and rough-and-tumble play teach us more about the roots of laughter than their evolutionary by-products of joking and stand-up comedy, the behaviors that captured the attention of so many philosophers and social scientists.

The present psycholinguistic approach to laughter is an outgrowth of a decade of research by the present authors on media interviews – a research tradition limited, until now, to the verbal elements of interviews. It is based upon a theory of perspectivity (O’Connell & Kowal under review a) that applies to both interviewer and interviewee in media interviews:

A perspective is simply “a position from which a person or a group view something (things, persons or events) and communicate their views” (Graumann & Kallmeyer 2002: 1). A core assumption of a theory of perspectivity as applied to language use is that every utterance that a speaker makes his or her own as “*author*” (Goffman 1981: 226) is perspectivized, i.e., sets a personal perspective of the speaker.

It is our conviction that this perspectivity extends to the use of nonverbal as well as verbal elements of an utterance. Hence, laughter is to be considered perspectival – a nonverbal, vocal communication of personal views. Centuries ago, Goethe expressed a proto-version of such perspectivity as an aphorism: “Nothing reveals people’s character more than what they consider laughable” (our translation; but see also the translation in Goethe [1809/1963: 176]).

Insofar as a media interview is a serious matter for politicians, whatever laughter they do produce therein must be considered quite noteworthy. Accordingly, the laughter of the *interviewee* Hillary Clinton, which we investigate in the following, was an important nonverbal expression of political or personal opinion. In such a perspectival theory, however, Clayman and Heritage’s (2002) claim that media *interviewers* maintain neutralism is at odds with the occurrence of interviewer laughter. Their laughter therefore becomes an important issue, and the question arises as to how Hillary Clinton can manage to laugh without an invitation on the part of her interviewers, i.e., in CA terms, “on a *volunteer basis*” (Jefferson 1979: 81).

## 2. Methods

The present corpus consists of a set of TV and radio interviews of Hillary Clinton, all carried out in the several weeks immediately following the publication of her memoirs *Living history* (Clinton 2003) as part of the publicity for its sale. A list of these interviews is to be found in Table 1. Analyses of her use of interjections (O’Connell, Kowal, & Ageneau in press) and of her use of the fillers *uh* and *um* (O’Connell & Kowal under review b) have already been completed.

Table 1

The Database of the Present Research: Television (TV) and Radio (R) Interviews of Hillary Clinton on the Occasion of the Publication of her Book *Living history* (2003)

Interviewer	Gender	Medium	Channel	Date
Barbara Walters	F	TV	ABC	6/8/2003
Katie Couric	F	TV	NBC	6/9-11/2003
Larry King	M	TV	CNN	6/10/2003
David Letterman	M	TV	CBS	6/16/2003
Terry Gross	F	R	NPR	6/12/2003
Juan Williams	M	R	NPR	6/19/2003

An analysis of Hillary Clinton's laughter (or hilarity: "boisterous and high-spirited merriment or laughter" [*Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary* 2003: 587], as her name suggests) is recommended by a number of considerations. First of all, her laughter is salient in the interviews. In her memoirs (Clinton 2003: 4), she described her laughter as an heritage from her father: "I inherited his laugh, the same big rolling guffaw that can turn heads in a restaurant and send cats running from the room." Furthermore, it is in the song-like form (occurring freely rather than as an overlay on the words of the speaker) and quite shrill. For research purposes, this makes it easy to identify in audio recordings; it does not fade unnoticed into the ambient speech or accompanying laughter or applause of other participants in the conversation. Her laughter is also easy to unitize into pulses or calls, and at a higher level, into episodes or bouts (see Bachorowski et al. 2001: 1583; Trouvain 2003: 2793 f.). It should be noted, however, that Bachorowski et al. and Trouvain both defined bouts as "entire laugh episodes that are typically produced during one exhalation" (Bachorowski et al. 2001: 1583), whereas Provine (2000: 26) defined the "*laugh episodes*" more inclusively: "A laugh episode consists of the comment immediately preceding laughter, and all laughter occurring within one second after the onset of the first laughter".

In the present research, our measurements are of calls and bouts of laughter, not of "*laugh episodes*". Ultimately, the research questions concern the formal and functional characteristics of Hillary Clinton's laughter. Hence, it is of interest to investigate the relative frequency of occurrence of her laughter and the laughter of her interviewers, the topics that elicit laughter, and the frequency of occurrence of laughter in the respective media (TV and radio) and both in response to and on the part of women and men interviewers. Also of interest is the difference between laughter in its autonomous form (the "song-like" component; Bachorowski et al. 2001: 1583) and laughter overlaid on speech ("speech-laugh"; Trouvain 2001: 634). The former is a sort of back channeling on the part of the auditor while another speaks or while no one speaks; the latter is laughter as an accompaniment of or overlay upon the speaker's own speech.

Transcripts were prepared, either from scratch or as revisions from transcripts available from media sources. The two co-authors had to agree on specific transcript contents in every case. Imperceptible contents were designated by an approximate number of syllables in parentheses. All instances of Hillary Clinton's laughter were subjected to temporal analyses by means of the PRAAT software ([www.praat.org](http://www.praat.org)) to a

cut-off point of 0.1 s. Interviewers' laughter was noted according to frequency of occurrence and eliciting topic, but was not sufficiently song-like, frequent, or sustained to be usefully analyzable by means of the PRAAT software.

Beyond these specifications, our laughter research has a certain exploratory and pilot quality – still not quite as Provine (2000) described his own research: “a catch-as-catch-can interdisciplinary work in progress” (9), “an improvisational scramble” (23). But we did find ourselves concerned about not leaving stones unturned – or perhaps tones undiscerned (with apologies). In a similar vein, Glenn (2003: 31) described his own recent work as “an answer to” (34) Mulkay's (1988: 110) assertion that “techniques must be found to investigate the fine detail of laughter in natural settings”. And so, our method is field observation, but with a quasi-experimental component, as Table 1 indicates: Our corpus allows us to compare systematically Hillary Clinton's laughter in the various interviews, the laughter of women and men interviewers, and the laughter in TV and radio media, and to apply both quantitative and qualitative analyses to the database.

### 3. Results

Hillary Clinton's laughter, initiated either during an interviewer's (I) or during her own (H) speech, is summarized in Table 2. Number of Bouts (B), duration thereof in seconds (s), and number of Calls (C) are recorded there, and for each response measure, the index of syllables per response measure (syl/B, syl/s, and syl/C) is given for each of the six interviews.

Table 2

Hillary Clinton's Laughter Initiated While the Interviewer (I) or She Herself (H) Was the Speaker in TV Interviews with Barbara Walters (BW), Katie Couric (KC), Larry King (LK), and David Letterman (DL), and in Radio (R) Interviews with Terry Gross (TG) and Juan Williams (JW): Number of Hillary Clinton's Syllables (H Syl), Number of Laughter Bouts (B), Duration of B in Seconds (s), Number of Laughter Calls (C), and the Corresponding Indices of Syllable per Response Measure (Syl/B, Syl/s, and Syl/C)

Speaker	Source Interview		H Syl	B	Syl/B	s	Syl/s	C	Syl/C
I	TV	BW	4,266	14	305	23.4	182	111	38
		KC	4,516	9	502	10.9	414	52	87
		LK	5,378	8	672	8.8	611	47	11
		DL	2,924	10	292	18.6	157	89	33
	R	TG	5,215	1	5,215	1.0	5,215	7	745
		JW	9,205	6	1,534	9.4	979	47	196
H	TV	BW	4,266	1	4,266	0.3	14,220	1	4,266
		KC	4,516	0	--	0	--	0	--
		LK	5,378	2	2,689	1.7	3,164	9	598
		DL	2,924	0	--	0	--	0	--

R	TG	5,215	5	1,043	2.4	2,173	14	372
	JW	9,205	12	767	12.8	719	62	148

From Table 2, it becomes clear that Hillary Clinton laughed in all her interviews, though not during her own speech in all of the interviews. About two thirds of her laughter overall was I laughter in the four TV interviews - 41 of her 68 bouts (60.3%) and 61.7 seconds of her 89.3 seconds of laughter (69.1%). The three indices of laughter are lower in all instances in the TV interviews than in the radio (R) interviews and higher in the radio (R) interviews than in the TV interviews in Hillary Clinton's I laughter and just the opposite in her H laughter. In other words, in the television interviews, she laughed more often, longer, and with a higher incidence of calls during the interviewer's speech than during her own articulated speech. In the radio interviews, it was just the other way around: Hillary Clinton laughed more, longer, and with more calls while she herself was speaking than while the interviewer was speaking. The complete absence of any overlap in these normalized indices renders the use of inferential statistics redundant.

In normative terms, the mean duration of bouts of I laughter was almost identical with the mean from Bachorowski et al.'s (2001: 1584) large corpus of laughter (0.86 ~ 0.87 s), whereas the mean for bouts in H laughter was considerably longer (1.50 s). Mean calls per bout (C/B) in I laughter also approximated the normative data (4.30 ~ 3.39), but again the mean calls per bout in H laughter were considerably greater (7.35). The mean number of calls per second (C/s) was 4.90 in H laughter and 5.00 in I laughter; the normative mean of Bachorowski et al. (2001: 1585) was 4.37 C/s. Overall, the mean duration of a laughter call on the part of Hillary Clinton was 0.20 s ( $SD = 0.04$ ). Again, our mean is quite comparable to Bachorowski et al.'s (0.20 ~ 0.23 s). However, in all these cases, the standard deviations in the normative data themselves were unusually high. Suffice it to say that Hillary Clinton's laughter was generally in keeping with recent normative data (see also Glenn 2003: 10 for older statistical norms).

In order to approach the psychological function of Hillary Clinton's laughter, we investigated the topics to which she reacted with laughter. In Table 3, these topics are ranked according to the duration of time in seconds (s) spent on each topic. Also listed there are the corresponding number of calls and bouts. The three response measures are not perfectly correlated because of varying articulation rates of the calls and bouts (syl/C; syl/B).

Table 3

Hillary Clinton's Laughter at Various Topics: Duration in Seconds (s) and Number of Calls of Laughter and Bouts of Laughter Across All Six Interviews, with Ranking According to Duration

Topic	Duration (s)	Rank	Calls of Laughter	Bouts of Laughter
Her Candidacy	17.7	1	85	9
Humor of Interviewer	12.7	2	58	6
Her Appearance	10.1	3	46	5
Her Writing/Speaking	9.1	4	42	7
Criticisms of Her	7.7	5	40	6
Courtship with Bill	7.1	6	35	6
Infidelity	5.6	7	29	6
Her Comments				
about Republicans	4.3	8	30	6
On Doing What is Right	3.9	9	13	1
Her Growing Up	3.3	10	23	4
Her Disregard of				
Media Presentations				
about Herself	3.0	11	17	4
Chelsea	1.7	12	10	2
Interviewer's				
Announcement of				
the End of the				
Interview	1.4	13	7	1
Health Care	0.8	14	4	4

What is immediately noteworthy is the peculiarity of the most frequent topic of Hillary Clinton's laughter: Her (presidential) Candidacy. All the other topics have in common that they are relatively concrete historical topics treated in her book. Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy, however, is a remote, future possibility, and it is also a topic that in itself – apart from speakers' and auditors' perspectives – is simply not humorous, but instead a very serious matter. The other frequent topics are for the most part personal. In fact, only the very last topic (Health Care), laughed at for less than a second, is clearly a matter of political policy. One could also include the topic Her Comments about Republicans as a matter of political policy. But both these topics – Health Care and Her Comments about Republicans – were discussed more personally than politically in these contexts. The list in Table 3 can hardly be said to reflect in any way the historical emphasis suggested in the book title *Living history*. In other words, many of the salient topics engaged in these interviews were not historical, but personal issues.

Table 4 breaks down topics of laughter for both Hillary Clinton and her interviewers by individual interview. Apart from the interview with David Letterman,

Table 4

Topics of Laughter and Number of Bouts of Laughter by Hillary Clinton (HC) and Interviewers (I): On TV – Barbara Walters (BW), Katie Couric (KC), Larry King (LK), David Letterman (DL); and on Radio (R) – Terry Gross (TG) and Juan Williams (JW)

Medium	Interview	Topic	Bouts of Laughter	
			HC	I
TV	BW	Her Candidacy	3	--
		Her Appearance	3	--
		Courtship with Bill	2	2
		Criticisms of Her	2	--
		Infidelity	2	--
		Health Care	1	--
		Chelsea	--	2
	KC	Her Candidacy	2	--
		Her Writing/Speaking	2	--
		Courtship with Bill	2	1
		Humor of Interviewer	1	--
		Criticisms of Her	1	--
		Her Comments about Republicans	1	--
	LK	Her Candidacy	1	--
		Her Writing/Speaking	1	--
		Infidelity	2	--
		Her Disregard of Media		
		Presentations of Herself	4	--
		Chelsea	2	--
	DL	Her Candidacy	3	2
		Humor of Interviewer	5	13
		Courtship with Bill	1	--
		Her Writing/Speaking	1	--
		Infidelity	--	3
		Her Humor	--	1
R	TG	Her Writing/Speaking	1	--
		Criticisms of Her	1	--
		Infidelity	1	--
		Her Comments about Republicans	3	--
	JW	Her Appearance	2	1



Her Writing/Speaking	2	1
Criticisms of Her	2	--
Courtship with Bill	1	--
Infidelity	1	--
Her Comments about Republicans	3	2
On Doing What is Right	1	--
Her Growing Up	2	--
Interviewer's Announcement of the End of the Interview	1	--
Health Care	3	1

in which he had more bouts of laughter than Hillary Clinton ( $19 > 10$ ), she herself laughed almost six times as often as her interviewers ( $58 > 10$  bouts). Letterman's laughter was, of course, a function of the fact that he is a professional comedian rather than a journalist. His purpose was primarily to amuse an audience, not to elicit the perspective of a politician.

Hillary Clinton laughed about her presidential candidacy in all the TV interviews, but not at all in the radio interviews, although the topic was discussed there. Both of her women TV interviewers – but none of the other interviewers – laughed about the courtship of Bill and Hillary Clinton, although she herself laughed about it in all but two (David Letterman and Terry Gross) of the interviews. Two of the interviewers, both men, David Letterman (19) and Juan Williams (5), accounted for most ( $24/29 = 82.8\%$ ) of the interviewers' bouts of laughter. One male and one female interviewer, Larry King and Terry Gross, did not laugh at all. At least in the case of Terry Gross, Hillary Clinton reciprocated insofar as she used the least laughter in this interview (6 bouts).

There was very little commonality across interviewers with respect to topics they laughed about. In fact, only one topic – Courtship with Bill – was laughed about by more than one interviewer – by both of the women TV interviewers (twice by Barbara Walters and once by Katie Couric). What Hillary Clinton laughed about most of all – Her Candidacy – was laughed about by only one interviewer (twice by David Letterman). Invited laughter in these interviews was primarily in response to the interviewer's humor (5 times by Hillary Clinton, and 13 times by David Letterman himself), to Hillary Clinton's humor (once by David Letterman), and to the girl-talk cues of Katie Couric and Barbara Walters. David Letterman accounted for almost half of all the interviewers' laughter by laughing at his own humor ( $13/29 = 44.8\%$ ).

In order to examine the punctuation effect (Provine 1993, 2000), i.e., the almost unique occurrence of laughter during the pauses after phrases and sentences, location of laughter was more specifically inspected. Provine's (1993: 296) claim in this regard was quite bold:

Laughter punctuates speech. Laughter of both speaker and audience occurred at the end of phrases or sentences. This punctuation effect was extremely strong; a speaker's laughter interrupted speech in less than 1% of laugh episodes. The prominence of this effect is so striking that it may be confirmed by cursory observations of social conversations.

In the present study, location was defined in relation to articulatory phrases, defined in turn as a sequence of syllables of a spoken utterance uninterrupted by a pause. This rationale yields three categories of laughter: (1) initial laughter, at the beginning of an articulatory phrase; (2) medial laughter, during an articulatory phrase; (3) punctuating (or terminal or final) laughter, at the end of an articulatory phrase. Medial laughter can be further divided into two subcategories, depending on whether the laughter occurs on the part of the speaker or on the part of the auditor. These two subcategories are identical with speech-laugh and song-like laugh, respectively, and with the H and I laughter, respectively, in Table 2. It should be noted that Provine (2000: 37) excluded speech-laugh (H laughter in the present data) from his analysis of the punctuation effect: "*Laughspeak*, a form of blended, laughing speech that communicates emotional tone, is qualitatively different from the classical ha-ha-type laughter considered here and was excluded from this analysis."

But it is not the speech-laugh that is crucial in the present analysis; only 20 bouts of speech-laugh occurred in the entire corpus ( $20/97 = 20.6\%$ ). The analysis that follows is concerned only with the 77 song-like bouts. The most dramatic departure from Provine's punctuation effect in our data is the medial occurrence of 36 of the song-like laughs (I laughter in the present data). These constitute the largest percentage of laughter ( $36/77 = 46.8\%$ ), whereas punctuating laughter accounts for only 28 ( $28/77 = 36.4\%$ ) of the laughs. The remaining laughter was initial ( $13/77 = 16.9\%$ ). Hence, the largest category of laughter was a sort of back channeling during the interviewer's speaking, not the punctuating laughter postulated by Provine.

#### 4. Discussion

The dominance of Hillary Clinton's laughter during her interviewers' speech in the TV interviews undoubtedly reflects the visual medium itself. Unlike radio, the TV medium presents the interviewee to the audience even during the speech of the interviewer. This visibility puts a certain pressure on the interviewee in turn to present herself at that moment and to respond to the interviewer in some way so as not to lose an immediate opportunity to react. Thus, in Example 1, Hillary Clinton (HC) laughed both in embarrassment and in order to handle the embarrassing situation socially while Barbara Walters (BW) described a courtship setting:

##### *Example 1*

**BW** your mother in law was amazed UH that her son was going to marry you she said he used to bring home beauty queens she said he figured 'n you wear no

**HC** (LAUGHING)

**BW** make-up you had big glasses and she wrote I would grind my teeth and I would wish I could sit Hillary on the edge of my tub and give her some make-up lessons

By contrast, a similar embarrassment to Hillary Clinton occurs in the comments of Terry Gross (TG) in her radio interview. But in the radio situation, Hillary Clinton's embarrassment management by means of laughter was delayed until her own turn. Then

only did she laugh as part of her own articulated speech:

*Example*

**TG** Senator Clinton you were a a kind of symbol of evil for the right when you were the first lady that I think UH that you were being less demonized now that you're actually in office as as senator from New York do you agree that you were more demonized as first lady than as senator and if so w- why do you think that that's true

**HC** well I think that it really is rooted in UH I'm sure some people symbolically UH being UH bothered or UH worried about what I represented apart from who I am as a person and I I also can see that you know obviously I'm not everyone's cup of tea (LAUGHING) you know I'm very outspoken I I work for what I believe in I I stand up to people in ways that I think UH help to make a point

Meanwhile, the interviewer was overlapping Hillary Clinton's last five words. The embarrassment is also reflected in Hillary Clinton's speaking by her use of five filled pauses (*UH*), one false start (*I think/I'm sure*), three repeats (*I I* thrice) and two fillers (*you know* twice). In addition to the laughter, these occurrences constitute a very high hesitation rate and accordingly strongly suggest that the laughter itself is indeed nervous and springs from embarrassment rather than amusement. Again, the postponement of Hillary Clinton's laughter pinpoints the difference between the TV and the radio setting: In radio, the virtually continuous visibility to the audience characteristic of TV is lacking, and microphone accessibility is instead typically successive, not simultaneous for interviewer and interviewee. Speaking in turns is still the convention when only the auditory mode is available. In the TV setting, laughter during the interviewer's speech is the convention, but not in the radio setting.

Perhaps the most straightforward of Hillary Clinton's instances of laughter about her presidential candidacy is to be found in her TV interview with Katie Couric (KC):

*Example 3*

**KC** you have said Senator Clinton you will not run for president in two thousand four tsk what if your party drafted you

**HC** (LAUGHING) that's not gonna happen we have very oh no you

**KC** what if it did what if they came to you and said Senator Hillary Clinton you are the only person in our view who can beat president Bush what would you do

This instance of laughter has been categorized as laughter during the interviewer's speech insofar as Katie Couric had the floor, insofar as it is not an instance of a speech-laugh, and above all insofar as the first pulse or call of Hillary Clinton's laughter overlapped with Katie Couric's *you*. Notably also, Hillary Clinton's laughter here preceded any verbalization by her, and that very verbalization was successfully interrupted by the interviewer after only eight syllables (*that's not gonna happen we have*) of Hillary Clinton's utterance.

In the authors' theory of perspectivity, the laughter itself is, of course, a

comment. The question must be engaged in all the instances of her laughter about her candidacy: What does the laugh really portend? Katie Couric's question isn't genuinely funny at all, and there is no need for embarrassment. In fact, given the political setting of these interviews, the question is clearly to be expected. What then does Hillary Clinton's laughter mean? What perspectival function does it serve in this context? It appears to us to be a simple, though coquettish, self-presentation on her part that has the import: "I have a secret that I'll not disclose here and now. So the next words I will say are a form of teasing, and not to be taken either literally or as my last word on the subject. Having now cleared the air by means of my laughter, I feel free to say whatever I wish as a verbal response." Indeed, this is to put words on her lips, but the salience of laughter on the topic of candidacy cries out for an interpretation beyond - and perhaps other than - whatever Hillary Clinton's own words literally communicate. Furthermore, Hillary Clinton's laughter about her presidential candidacy is an example of "the kind of laughter people produce when faced with a situation demanding politeness yet provoking discomfort" (Glenn 2003: 151). Politics is very serious business, and Hillary Clinton's laughter managed the situation accordingly; it is not at all clear that her underlying emotion "is pleasant", as Chafe (2003a: 41; see also Chafe 2003b) would contend. The occurrence of this kind of laughter poses a serious challenge to the claim made by Chafe that the function of laughter is essentially to express the emotion or feeling of nonseriousness.

The following instance involves laughter on the part of both Katie Couric and Hillary Clinton on the topic of the courtship of Bill and Hillary Clinton. The audio version sounds like and is girl-talk – staged girl-talk:

*Example 4*

**KC** (LAUGHING) you write about his hands you say one of the first things I noticed about Bill Clinton was the shape of his hands his wrists are narrow and elegant and his long fingers deft like those of a pianist or a surgeon when we first met in law school I loved just watching him turn the pages of a book  
**HC** **WOW**  
 (LAUGHING) **HO**

Unlike the previous examples, in all of which embarrassment or diplomacy was paramount for the initiation of laughter - and laughter only on the part of the interviewee - Example 4 manifests a topic eminently suited to girl-talk and "shared laughter" (Hopper 1992: 179). Accordingly, Barbara Walters, the only other woman TV interviewer, was the only other interviewer who laughed with Hillary Clinton about her courtship with Bill Clinton. In the first three examples, Hillary Clinton laughed alone, "on a *volunteer basis*" (Jefferson 1979: 81), whereas in Example 4 and with Barbara Walters, she laughed at the invitation of the interviewer.

Example 4 also provides an excellent example of the complex interrelationship between orality and literacy in these interviews. Katie Couric's question was couched as a quotation from Hillary Clinton's book *Living history* (2003: 54), but it was at the same time incorporated into a spontaneous and otherwise unscripted question – a case of explicit intertextuality, and more explicitly, an intrusion of literacy into an oral context. At the other extreme, Hillary Clinton's laughter and her two interjections *WOW* and *HO*

were at the other end of the continuum of spontaneity and orality. In fact, the first of the two interjections *WOW* was articulated with six rhythmic calls, very much like the laughter that followed immediately thereafter.

The present research clearly indicates that speakers and auditors laugh more or less in dependence upon the setting: The auditor laughed more in the TV interviews, whereas the speaker laughed more in the radio interviews. Hence, we can conclude that the generalization of Duncan and Fiske (1977: 79) and of Provine (2000: 3), namely that speakers laugh more than auditors, is to be considered idiosyncratic to their database. Since Provine's (1993) database is primarily associated with the punctuation effect, his corpus is discussed in that context in the following paragraph. In the case of Duncan and Fiske's (1977: 36-39) database, the corpus consisted of five-minute samples of dialogue on self-selected topics between previously unacquainted same-sex and opposite-sex dyads of paid students. In this setting, "a laugh was a fairly rare event" (80); laughs tended "to be brief and hence the duration of laughs was not scored" (43). It should also be noted that the exclusion from each sample of the first two of the total of seven minutes of dialogue (37) effectively deleted any laughter that might have been occasioned by initial embarrassment or nervousness with an unfamiliar interlocutor.

A similar dependence on setting also delimits the punctuation effect (Provine 1993, 1996, 2000). Provine's (1993: 296) generalization that "laughter seldom interrupts speech" was not confirmed in our findings: Hillary Clinton's laughter in the TV interviews was characteristically a medial back channeling in reaction to the ongoing speaking of the interviewer rather than a punctuating laughter. The differences between Provine's and our results may be due to his methods. More specifically, his assistants surreptitiously "eavesdropped on groups of laughing people" (Provine 1996: 41) from a distance and recorded their own perceptions in notebooks instead of measuring the "pauses at the ends of phrases and sentences" (Provine 1993: 29) instrumentally. Such methods have been shown to be lacking in both validity and reliability (see Kowal & O'Connell 2000; Spinos, O'Connell, & Kowal 2002). It is quite possible, then, that the punctuation effect is the product of Provine's methodology.

Finally, the generalization that men laugh less than women (Duncan & Fiske 1977: 79; O'Connell & Kowal 1998: 555 f.; Provine 2000: 3) is also shown to be idiosyncratic to specific databases. The present data clearly indicate that the men interviewers laughed more than the women interviewers and, in fact, accounted for almost nine tenths (88.9 %) of all interviewer laughter. Even exclusive of the comedian David Letterman's laughter, Juan Williams laughed more often than both the women interviewers who laughed (Barbara Walters and Katie Couric; 5 > 4 and 5 > 1, respectively).

## 5. Concluding comments

The findings of this research regarding the predominant occurrence of auditor laughter, back-channeling laughter, and men's laughter cumulate somehow to a conclusion that research on laughter in the future must *not* be limited to homogeneous databases. The setting in which laughter occurs contributes very strongly to all these patterns of

laughter. And it is precisely the use of quantitative methods that illuminates such patterns of laughter and allows us to go beyond Clayman and Heritage's (2002) level of global equivalence between TV and radio interviews to very specific differences (O'Connell and Kowal under review a):

The TV visual component eradicates once and for all the relevance of down time. There is no longer any such thing, since the visual array is continuous. This change has dramatic implications for the temporal organization of the TV interview in comparison with the radio interview; it also affords the TV audience an abundance of additional cues that may preclude any convincing show of neutralism on the part of the interviewer.

A final note regards our finding that all but two of the interviewers in this database laughed. In our theory of perspectivity, laughter is always perspectival, i.e., it manifests some sort of position taking on the part of the laugher, even though the laughter itself is nonverbal. Such a perspectival use of laughter on the part of media interviewers would appear to contradict the claim of Clayman and Heritage (2002) that media interviewers exercise neutralism in their interviewing style. Nonetheless, our perspectival approach to laughter is in complete accord with Glenn's (2003: 34) recent CA approach to laughter: "A CA grounding guides interest in the perspectives of the actors." Personal perspective rather than neutralism is also in keeping with the findings of Haakana (2002: 228). With respect to "'professional cautiousness' or 'neutrality'", Haakana claimed that "Laughter is an affective action that is often a deviation from these attributes."

Laughter, then, is always a nonverbal expression of personal perspective, and Hillary Clinton's laughter about her presidential candidacy poses the most dramatic example of such perspectivity in our present database: The topic itself is not at all funny; the laughter was not invited by the interviewer; and Hillary Clinton used her laughter as a ploy to avoid a definitive answer to the question. It is also of note that the one interviewer who was a professional comedian rather than a professional media journalist was the one who accounted for two thirds (65.5 %) of all interviewer laughter, and, once again, that the men rather than the women interviewers accounted for 88.9 % of the interviewer laughter. Future research should not hesitate to investigate other settings of verbal interaction in which laughter is salient and to make use of quasi-experimental designs wherever possible.

All in all, the importance of setting and context lead us to conclude in agreement with Kuschel (1994: 134):

It has proved impossible to produce a generally valid definition of what is comic and laughable. Instead, the insight has become established that what is comic differs widely, depending on the producer and the situation, and on the historical and the cultural context.

In short, laughter is indeed perspectival - the nonverbal expression of personal perspective.

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