

https://dspace.org/

Food Talk: A Window into Inequality among University Students

Dominguez-Whitehead, Yasmine; Whitehead, Kevin A

2014-01
De Gruyter Mouton
http://hdl.handle.net10539/13577
Dominguez-Whitehead, Y., & Whitehead, K. A. (2014). Food talk: A window into inequality among university students. Text & Talk, 34(1), 49-68.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Food Talk: A Window into Inequality among University Students*

Yasmine Dominguez-Whitehead

Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Private Bag 3

Wits 2050

Johannesburg

South Africa

Tel: +27 11 717 3283

Fax: +27 86 218 2401

yasmine.dominguez-whitehead@wits.ac.za

Kevin A. Whitehead

School of Human and Community Development

University of the Witwatersrand

Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050

Johannesburg, South Africa

Tel: +27(0)11 717 4530

kevin.whitehead@wits.ac.za

Published in: *Text & Talk, 34*(1), 49-68, January, 2014.

Abstract

Although initially related to the country's colonial and apartheid history, material inequality in South Africa has deepened, with recent research suggesting that South Africa now has the highest levels of inequality in the world. In this paper, we examine the interactional reproduction of inequality by paying particular attention to the discursive and interactional practices employed in students' talk about food. Specifically, we examine food-related troubles-talk and food-related jokes and humor, showing how students who described food-related troubles produced these troubles as shared and systemic, while students who produced food-related jokes displayed that they take for granted the material resources needed to have a range of food consumption choices available to them, while treating food consumption as a matter of individual choice. These orientations were collaboratively produced through a range of interactionally-organized practices, including patterns of alignment and dis-alignment, pronoun use, laughter, and aspects of the formulation of utterances. While our analysis primarily focuses on these discursive and interactional practices, we also consider how discursive practices can be linked to the material conditions of participants' lives outside of the analyzed interactions.

Key words: inequality, food talk, troubles-talk, jokes/humor, university students, South Africa

1. Introduction

South Africa has a long history of extreme inequality that has undoubtedly been reinforced by apartheid and its legacy, but that has also increased despite the transition to democracy in 1994. Severe inequality in South Africa has been well researched by taking into consideration a host of institutional, societal, and economic factors (see, for example, Bhorat et al. 2009; Sanders and Chopra 2006; Seekings and Nattrass 2005). Despite this thorough documentation of the extent of inequalities, the gap between the rich and poor in South Africa has continued to widen. For example, economists have provided evidence that "South Africa is now [quite possibly] the most consistently unequal economy in the world" (Bhorat et al. 2009: 1), and Avirgan (2006) reports that South Africa has surpassed Brazil as the world's most unequal society. Unemployment, low wages, and perpetual increases in the cost of education contribute to extreme inequality. However, hefty profits at the opposite end of the spectrum also contribute to the gross discrepancies between rich and poor.

In the face of such inequality, education has been seen as an important means – indeed, arguably *the* most important means – through which ordinary South Africans can improve their life chances. Accordingly, a central priority of South Africa's post-apartheid governments has been to transform the country's higher education system, and to improve access to education for South African citizens (Education 1997). As a result, South African universities have seen a shift in the ethnic, academic, and financial backgrounds of students (Lumadi and Mampuru 2010). These changes in student bodies have been more pronounced at historically White universities that were previously predominantly reserved for White middle-class and affluent students. Participation of Black students in higher education has expanded with these students generally coming from low-income and impoverished backgrounds (Jordaan and Wiese 2010). These

demographic changes in South African universities have also resulted in increased attention to social dynamics among students from diverse backgrounds, who are increasingly coming into contact with others from whom they were, particularly during the apartheid era, largely separated. These concerns about social relations in higher education settings are reflected in a growing body of research that has examined these matters (see, for example, Durrheim et al. 2004; Pattman 2007).

Although there is a dearth of research on university student poverty, the experiences of impoverished university students in the context of South Africa have been documented (see, for example, Firfirey and Carolissen 2010) and poverty in higher education has been discussed as it relates to policy issues (see, for example, Maile 2008). These studies have suggested that impoverished university students experience hopelessness, internalized oppression, and shame, and utilize strategies to conceal their poverty (Firfirey and Carolissen 2010). It should therefore come as no surprise that the stressors experienced coupled with the lack of material resources often result in financially needy students not performing well or dropping out of university. Letseka and Maile's (2008) research, which surveyed university drop-outs and their families, indicates that approximately 70 percent of the families of drop-outs are classified as having low socio-economic status. Furthermore, these figures intersect with racial inequalities, with families of African students who had dropped out earning meager wages – some as little as 1,600 rand (approximately US$175) per month (Letseka and Maile 2008).

One of the consequences of growing inequality on South African campuses (as in South African society as a whole) is the heightened relevance of issues of food insecurity, which is taken up in a limited but growing research literature. For example, Munro et al. (in press) found that students are more likely to experience hunger at the end of a term near examination time (as

their monetary resources are used up in the beginning and the middle of the term) and that financial aid recipients are significantly more vulnerable to food insecurity compared to their non-financial aid counterparts. In addressing factors that affect the academic performance of Black students from disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa, Jama et al. (2008) have noted the detriments of not having access to basic necessities such as food, clothes, and accommodation. Students struggling to meet their basic needs also struggle to pay their fees and purchase books, with attendant consequences for their chances of attaining academic success (Africa 2005; Jama et al. 2008). It has been noted that "critical educators and researchers cannot ignore food practices as means of social reproduction, oppression, and resistance" (Weaver-Hightower 2011: 19), a point that is particularly salient in South Africa in light of the current heightened relevance of food-related issues in South African universities.

While the literature discussed above provides an overview of the significance of material inequalities in the context of South Africa in general, and South African universities in particular, no research of which we are aware has examined how these inequalities become observable, and are thereby reproduced, through students' ordinary discursive and interactional practices. Research at the intersection of inequality and social interaction has demonstrated that inequality can be reproduced through socio-discursive practices produced in talk-in-interaction (see, for example, Prego-Vázquez 2007; Van Der Valk 2003; Whitehead 2013), and it has been noted that discourse analysis can be employed to explore "the many ways power, dominance and inequality are expressed, enacted and reproduced in discourse" (Van Dijk 1999: 460). In the analysis that follows, we contribute to this body of research by demonstrating that the detailed examination of food-related talk can provide insights into understandings of inequality. Specifically, we examine how inequality becomes observable in interactions among university

students, through two main ways of talking about food, namely food-related "troubles-talk" (Jefferson 1984), and food-related jokes or humor.

2. Data and method

The data examined in the following sections was drawn from a larger focus group-based study on South African university students. The data corpus consists of 16 focus groups, which were facilitated by the first author, and involved a total of 66 participants. The video and audio recordings of the focus groups comprise a total of over 14 hours of data. All the participants were current students on the campus on which the focus groups were conducted, and their status as such was the sole basis upon which they were recruited for participation in the study.[1] The participants were not specifically questioned about their food practices, or about their socio-economic status, as part of this broader study. Instead, they were asked open-ended questions with respect to their favorite things about being students at their university, the strengths of the university, the challenges and difficulties they experience, what could be done to improve their lives as students, what kinds of events or incidents had been particularly important for them during their time as students, and how their background or life experiences had impacted their university experience. The questions posed were not intended to be comprehensive, but were instead aimed at providing the participants with opportunities to collaboratively construct their experiences, both positive and negative, as students at their university. It is thus noteworthy that food and/or eating spontaneously emerged as topics of discussion in ten of the 16 focus groups, thus demonstrating their salience as concerns for the participants, while simultaneously serving to position them (whether implicitly or explicitly) in particular ways with respect to socio-economic matters.

It is important to note that, despite the open-ended nature of the focus groups, the interactions therein represent a particular form of researcher-generated data, rather than being sites of everyday naturally-occurring discourse (see, for example, Potter and Hepburn 2005; Puchta and Potter 2004). These interactions nonetheless represent a useful site for the examination of some ways in which students talk about the matters around food on which we focus in the analysis. However, it should be noted that the aim of the analysis is to develop detailed descriptions of the interactional exchanges we examine, rather than making claims about the likelihood that they would be prevalent, or would unfold in similar ways, in other interactional settings. Future analyses of data from other contexts may thus be required in order to investigate questions of this nature.

Our analysis focuses on some ways in which participants' discursive practices in the focus group interactions can be linked to material conditions in their lives outside of the interactions. In this sense, it is similar to the approach described by Sims-Schouten et al. (2007; also see the approach employed by Whitehead 2013). Sims-Schouten et al. argue that examining participants' talk without considering its relationship to their material conditions is limiting, and suggest that their approach "positions their [participants'] talk within the materiality that they also have to negotiate" (Sims-Schouten et al. 2007: 103; also see Foucault 1981). This approach thus serves as a useful starting point for considering how participants' food-related talk could provide insights into both discursive practices and material inequalities of the sort described in the above section. In addition, our analysis draws on conversation analytic (Sacks 1992; Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 2007a) and ethnomethodological (Garfinkel 1967) insights and techniques, as we examine the sequential unfolding of the focus group interactions, and the ways in which

participants collaboratively produce particular orientations toward food as shared or taken-for-granted.

The audio/video recordings of the focus groups were transcribed utilizing the conversation analytic conventions developed primarily by Gail Jefferson (see Jefferson 2004). The excerpts examined in the following sections demonstrate the ways in which participants across the data talked about food, and the ways in which their food-related talk served as a site for the discursive production of material inequalities. While discussions of food were not the only site at which inequality became observably relevant in the data,[2] we focus on food as a topic that illustrates these issues particularly clearly and recurrently in the data. The analysis was thus focused on describing in detail the ways in which participants positioned themselves and others (through their use of particular discursive and interactional practices) in relation to the food issues about which they were talking. As such, the analysis took into consideration not only the content of students' reports and concerns, but also how these reports were interactionally produced by participants. The excerpts included were selected to exemplify the ways in which participants talked about food in the focus groups in which it emerged as a topic, while illustrating the range of variation in the interactional features of such talk. All names of participants are pseudonyms, and the facilitator is designated as "Fac" in the transcripts. The transcription symbols used in the transcripts included in our analysis are described in the Appendix.

3. Food-related troubles-talk

In this section we examine some ways in which students who described troubles relating to acquiring sufficient, and sufficiently nutritious food collaboratively produced their food troubles

as shared and systemic concerns. A number of practices that together contribute towards this outcome are produced in Excerpt 1 below, in which the participants discuss their troubles with respect to not being able to afford sufficient food.

Excerpt 1

1	John:	They provide us with uh financial aid of
2		(it's so low,) they usually pay us like uh (0.8)
3		five hundred rands, (0.4) for like two months or
4		something.
5		(0.3)
6	Fac:	M[m.
7	John:	[So we have to eat on that for (0.5) close-
8		close to two months.
9		(1.0)
10	John:	Five hundred rand(s). And that is (0.2)
11		((shakes head)) (too hard it's-)
12	Zodwa:	Mm hm. ((Zodwa and Motle shake their heads))
13	John:	And food prices are bad these days. ((smiling))
14	(Busi):	Huh huh [huh
15	(Sibo):	[U[hh[h hh
16	Mosegi:	[Hh[h uhuh huh
17	(Motle):	[Hh[h heh heh heh .h[hh
18	Zodwa:	[Huh huh
19	Gugu:	Every (day I'm °living °)
20		(0.3)
21	John:	So when the exams come we'll (have eh) (.)
22		finished everything, (0.8) and uh (we won't
23		have really any money anymore this year.)

John begins this troubles-telling by describing the amount of financial aid funding he and others (as shown by his use of the pronoun "us" on line 1) receive. In doing so, he reveals that he and the others he has referred to are recipients of financial aid, thereby implicitly revealing that they have been deemed by the university to be financially under-resourced (given that financial aid is awarded on the basis of need rather than being available to all students). Following a brief pause and the facilitator's minimal uptake (lines 5-6), John produces a connection between the financial aid funding and food-related troubles, describing how long they "have to eat on that" (line 7). He thereby implicitly uses the category "financial aid recipient" that he earlier introduced, and the associated commonsense knowledge about the financial status of incumbents of that category (see Schegloff 2007b) to account for the trouble he is describing.

This troubles-telling makes relevant some kind of display of uptake or "troubles-receptiveness" (Jefferson 1984), but when none is forthcoming during a lengthy pause (line 9), John pursues a response by repeating the figure he has produced previously (line 10) and by producing an evaluation (while shaking his head) of how difficult this situation is. This is met with the uptake John was apparently pursuing, as Zodwa displays agreement while shaking her head, and Motle also shakes her head – both thus aligning with John by producing the same gesture he has just produced. This alignment is consistent with John's unvarying use of collective pronouns in his troubles-telling, as he uses the pronoun "us" (as mentioned above) in describing the amount of financial aid funding provided for food (lines 1 and 2), and uses "we" (line 7) in reporting how long the money has to last for (see Íñigo-Mora 2004 for a detailed account of uses of "we"). These collective pronouns serve to produce the troubles about which he is talking as not limited to his own personal experiences, but as also shared by others like him –

whether that be others in this specific focus group interaction, or other students more generally. So, Zodwa's and Motle's abovementioned alignment with John seems to be a display of their shared membership in the collectives indexed through his pronoun use, and thus their shared experience of the troubles he has described.

Following these displays of alignment, John continues, beginning with the connecting word "and" before noting that "food prices are bad these days" (line 13), which serves as an upgrade of the trouble he has just described.[3] However, he smiles as he says this, and Busi responds by laughing immediately after he finishes his utterance (line 14), with the other participants joining in the laughter shortly afterwards (lines 15-18) as John continues to smile. This appears to be a display of what Jefferson (1984: 351) calls "troubles-resistance", referring to the way in which laughter by troubles-tellers shows that they are not allowing the trouble to get the better of them, and are "in good spirits and in a position to take the trouble lightly". These participants' laughter may thus be a way of displaying their co-ownership of the trouble John has described, as well as a communal display of resilience in the face of the trouble. By contrast, the facilitator's non-laughter here may serve to index her status as an outsider to the student community of which these participants are members, which is consistent with Jefferson's (1984) observation that troubles-recipients recurrently do not join in with troubles-tellers' laughter, but instead treat it seriously as a way of showing troubles-receptiveness. In this way, the facilitator appears to be positioned as a troubles-recipient for the collectively-shared and collaboratively produced troubles of the participants.

Finally, following a partially inaudible utterance from Gugu (line 19), and a brief pause (line 20), John produces a further elaboration of his troubles-telling. He begins again with a connecting word ("so", line 21), showing that he is continuing with his previous telling, before

producing an upshot of the telling (lines 21-23). As he did in the prior components of the telling (as described above), John uses the collective pronoun "we" (see lines 21 and 22) in producing this upshot, thereby further contributing to his production of the troubles he is describing as shared rather than specific to himself as an individual.

A similar set of practices can be observed in Excerpt 2, in which the participants of a different focus group also complain about limited financial aid funding, and the food-related troubles that result from it. Prior to the transcribed excerpt, Sbu has described the financial aid system, and has suggested that "most of us, as we sit here, I think we are all using financial aid". In addition, he has noted that "our parents don't have money". Thus, similarly to Excerpt 1 (and even more explicitly so), most or all of the participants are identified as being financially under-resourced, and this serves as a basis for the troubles Sbu describes in the excerpt.

Excerpt 2:

1	Sbu:	But (0.8) in the financial aid, w- we we don't
2		get enough money.
3		(0.4) ((Facilitator nods))
4	Sbu:	So, we end up like (1.0) chowing things that we
5		are not like (.) capable of eating like we end
6		up like going to sl- the lunch will be like a
7		bread, the breakfast (we) will be like eating a
8		bread, (0.2) with a- (.) (eh-) like maybe a
9		slice of bread with a juice at the morning,
10		.hhh after lunch, (.) (a) slice of bread
11		with (a) juice, supper, ((smiling)) (.) sl(h)ice
12		[o(h)f [br(h)[ead with (a) juice, I mean, I mean
13	Lebo:	[Uheh [heh [.hhh

14 Mandla: [((starts smiling))
15 Ncebo: [((starts smiling, turns toward Sbu))
16 Sbu: .hh we don't eat fruit, like (0.2) at the
17 counselling they say, (.hh) "You should eat fruit
18 every day." I mean they are so s- expensive you
19 can't afford them, that's the problem. We do want
20 to eat fruit every day, we do want to eat .hh healthy
21 food, (0.2) but the problem is that the money that
22 they are giving us is not enough to buy the healthy
23 food, we end up buying like (0.7) th- the- this
24 stuff the- the- the cheap- th- this stuff that are
25 eh much cheaper.

Sbu begins with a complaint similar to the one produced by John at the beginning of Excerpt 1, relating to the inadequacy of the financial aid money the participants receive (lines 1-2). Following a nod from the facilitator (line 3), Sbu continues to develop the troubles-telling, complaining about the low-quality food (lines 4-5), and the monotonous diet (lines 6-12) that the lack of funds results in. As he produces this description, he begins to smile (line 10) and then laugh (lines 11-12), with Lebo joining in the laughter (line 13) shortly after Sbu begins, and Mandla and Ncebo beginning to smile (lines 14 and 15) just after the onset of Lebo's laughter. Similarly to Excerpt 1, the facilitator does not laugh or smile, suggesting that again, following Jefferson (1984), the participants are displaying troubles-resistance and producing this trouble as collectively shared, while the facilitator is positioned as a troubles-recipient.

Sbu then continues his troubles-telling, complaining that the financial aid funding does not enable the purchasing of "healthy food" such as fruit, despite the students' desires to follow the advice given to them at the campus counselling center to do so (lines 16-25). Throughout this

troubles-telling (and as was the case in Excerpt 1), Sbu consistently uses collective pronouns, as he uses "we" throughout his complaint about the inadequacy of financial aid funds, the resulting repetitive diet purchased in order to make the funds stretch, and the inaccessibility and unaffordability of healthy food (see lines 1, 4, 5, 7, 16, 19, 20 and 23), and uses "us" (line 22) in repeating his earlier complaint about the inadequacy of financial aid funds. In addition, Sbu uses the second-person pronoun "you" (line 18) in an indeterminate manner, such that it "refer[s] to any human being in the local and global linguistic and social context" as opposed to employing it in a determinate manner, which would unambiguously specify who it refers to (Bull and Fetzer 2006: 4). As in Excerpt 1, the use of pronouns in these ways contributes to the production of the food troubles being described as a generalized problem that is shared by others in addition to the participant describing them. As a result, the participants are able to deflect responsibility for these troubles away from themselves as individuals and instead point toward a systemic problem.

This is further reinforced in Excerpt 2 by features of Sbu's formulation of the food troubles. For instance, he notes, "We do want to eat fruit every day, we do want to eat .hh healthy food, (0.2) but the problem is that the money that they are giving us is not enough to buy the healthy food" (lines 19-23). The trouble being complained about is thus produced as stemming not from students' individual desires or motivations, but instead from insufficient funding to enable them to make the choices they would like to make as individuals. This is particularly emphasised by the stress he places on the word "do", which serves to contrast it with the opposing possibility that not eating "healthy food" is a result of the students' lack of desire to do so. As such, Sbu treats these food troubles as stemming from a university or a higher education system that does not provide sufficient resources for students who struggle to acquire sufficient or adequate food.

Excerpts 1 and 2 thus demonstrate how the participants' status as financial aid recipients, and hence financially under-resourced students, serves as both the material basis for the food-related troubles they describe, and as a discursive resource for producing their troubles-tellings. In this way, the students' socio-economic positions are both reflected in their conduct in the focus group discussions, and serve as a constitutive feature of the interactional production of the discussions. In addition, the troubles at hand are collaboratively produced as shared and systemic through a range of interactionally-organized practices, including the patterns of alignment, the use of collective pronouns, the production of laughter, and the ways in which the troubles are formulated. As a result, the shared and systemic character of the troubles can be seen as a taken-for-granted product of the discursive resources provided by the participants' material positions, and the ways in which these resources are woven together with a range of interactional practices to talk about a particular topic – food. At the same time, however, one could consider how this type of material position could be linked to particular discursive limitations or constraints, and how this may result in a range of things that *cannot* be taken for granted. This consideration is further illuminated by our examination in the following section of a contrasting form of food talk, namely food-related jokes and humor.

4. Food-related jokes and humor

In contrast to the types of food-related troubles discussed recurrently throughout the data, and examined in the preceding section, the following excerpts demonstrate participants' production of food-related jokes and humor. While humor is also evident in the preceding excerpts, it is (as discussed above) tied to troubles-telling, and serves to display resilience in the face of troubles. This contrasts with the food-related jokes and humor produced by participants in Excerpts 3 and

4, which are not produced in the course of troubles-tellings, and which (despite their light-hearted nature) serve as a vehicle for participants' implicit displays of their taken for granted access to (varied types of) food, and their ability to make choices around food consumption without being subject to the types of financial constraints described in Excerpts 1 and 2. A first instance of these phenomena is shown in Excerpt 3, in which the participants joke about the wide range of food available to them, particularly in the cafeteria on one of their university's campuses. Prior to this excerpt, the participants have positively assessed this cafeteria, and the facilitator responds by expressing a desire to "go there now" (line 1), which occasions a joke by Betty (lines 2-3).

Excerpt 3:

1	Fac:	I have to go there now. ((smiling))
2	Betty:	.hh=Hah, you have to! Oh my word, you walk in there
3		and you like immediately feel fat.
4	Sherry:	Uh[ah [hah hah .hhh
5	Betty:	[Huh [huh huh
6	Tia:	[Huh huh
7	Fac:	[Huh huh huh .hh
8	Tia:	They've got like [oh:
9	Sherry:	[But there is healthy food
10		[there.
11	Tia:	[donuts and pastries and like (.) anything you
12	Betty:	[Yes.
13	Tia:	can possibly think of, they've probably got.
14	Betty:	Pizza, they've got Ha[laal food, they've got
15	Tia:	[Ice cream.

16 Betty: everything.

Betty's joke involves the construction of an association between the varied range of food available at this cafeteria and "feel[ing] fat" upon entering the cafeteria. Similarly to Sbu in Excerpt 2, Betty makes use of the indeterminate "you" in constructing this association, thus treating this reaction to walking into the cafeteria as one that would be experienced by students (or people) in general. In doing so, she treats the ability to consume this food as a taken-for-granted consequence of its availability in the cafeteria. That is, by claiming that simply entering the cafeteria is sufficient to make "you" "feel fat" she draws an implicit link between being present in the cafeteria and having the potential to purchase food there, such that one could "feel fat" as a result of recognizing the potential range and amount of food that one could *consume* in the cafeteria. In this way, she treats as taken-for-granted that people visiting the cafeteria would have sufficient funds at their disposal to purchase the food available there.

Immediately after Betty completes her utterance, Sherry begins to laugh (line 4), with Betty herself joining in shortly after (line 5) and Tia and the facilitator also joining in just after Betty (lines 6 and 7). This shared laughter serves as a mutual ratification of the joke Betty has produced (Glenn 2003), and thus demonstrates the participants' and facilitator's shared recognition and appreciation of the association on which the joke was based. The participants in this excerpt thus collaboratively produce the availability of a wide range of food, and the attendant risk of over-consumption, as a generalized and taken-for-granted state of affairs for those who visit the cafeteria. This orientation is further displayed throughout the remainder of the excerpt (lines 8-16), as Tia, Sherry and Betty collaboratively discuss the types of food available in the cafeteria (using the indeterminate "you" once more, in line 11), while not displaying awareness of any constraints to accessing this food.

It is noteworthy that Sherry's claim about the healthy food available (line 9) is produced as a disagreeing response to Betty's claim about feeling fat, as shown by her use of the word "But" at the beginning of her response. Sherry thus disagrees with what Betty has just said on the basis that that the cafeteria should not (or should not solely) be associated with "feeling fat" because there is also the type of "healthy" food that one could eat without "feeling fat" as a result. However, this disagreement does not challenge the taken-for-grantedness of being able to afford to buy whatever food they want – healthy or otherwise – which is implicit in Betty's statement. Instead, Sherry's statement aligns with the presumption that whatever food is available at the cafeteria is potentially purchasable for them. Thus, even in disagreeing, there is no indication or recognition of the possibility that money might be an obstacle to being able to choose whether to eat, and what to eat.

This implicit orientation to the taken-for-granted *availability* of a range of choices with respect to food consumption contrasts with the explicit complaints of the participants in Excerpts 1 and 2, who produced a *lack* of access to food as a generalized feature of the experiences of students. A similar collective orientation is also evident in Excerpt 4, which is initiated by Josh's humorous assessment of a restaurant on the campus on which the focus group was conducted.

Excerpt 4

```
1      Josh:  Wits has probably got (.) arguably the cheapest
2             restaurant in [this  [world.
3     Chris:                [U[huh [huh huh huh [huh
4      Greg:                  [Huh [huh huh huh [huh huh
5     Julie:                       [Huh huh huh [huh huh
6       Jen:                       [(Hah hah hah)
7   Melissa:                       [((smiles))
```

8 Fac: [Which one?
9 Josh: K[ara Nicha's.
10 Melissa: [Kara Nicha's.
11 Julie: [Kara Nicha's, [(it's [so-)
12 Greg: [Ha:: [huh huh huh
13 Fac: [Huh [huh huh huh
14 Josh: [No, no look,
15 Jen: ([ )
16 Josh: [I don't eat there because I can't, but
17 I'm sorry when it costs five [rand for something
18 (Julie): [Uhuh huh (huh)
19 Josh: [this big ((produces hand gesture)) you know
20 Greg: [Uhuh huh huh huh huh
21 Josh: that you're in the right [place, [(you don't even)
22 Chris: [Huh huh [huh huh
23 Jen: [Uhuh huh huh
24 Josh: [( )
25 Melissa: [OR you should be wor[ried! Her[e, no! Huh huh huh
26 Chris: [(Look at [those- And you know-)
27 Julie: [Huh huh huh huh huh
28 huh [huh ((nodding and looking at Melissa))
29 Chris: [You know that Indians hate it, they say it's
30 not real Indian food, I don't care eheh heh
31 h[eh
32 Josh: [Y[a.
33 Jen: [(It's so good.)
34 Melissa: I had a toasted sandwich there, I'm never gonna
35 eat there again (>c's tha'<) was horrible.
36 Julie: Ya no no no, try- try one of their roti rolls.

Josh produces his formulation of the restaurant in an extreme format ("arguably the cheapest restaurant in this world", lines 1-2) that is consistent with Edwards' (2000) description of extreme case formulations as a means of joking through the use of non-literal exaggeration. This formulation is immediately treated as a joke, with four participants beginning to laugh in overlap with the end of Josh's utterance (lines 3-6), and a fifth participant smiling at the same time (line 7). This serves as a display of these participants' recognition and appreciation of both the non-serious nature of Josh's formulation (see Glenn 2003), as well as of the restaurant he has referred to – even though he has not mentioned it by name. This shared knowledge of the restaurant is further displayed when the facilitator takes up the matter of the as-yet unspecified name of the restaurant (line 8) and Josh, Melissa and Julie nearly simultaneously provide the name (lines 9-11). This occasions a further round of laughter by Greg (line 12), as well as laughter by the facilitator (line 13), who now (having been informed of which restaurant Josh was referring to) appears to be displaying her own familiarity with the restaurant, and appreciation of Josh's joke.

This shared knowledge of the restaurant in question, and particularly of its unusually low prices, thus serves as a resource for the production and mutual appreciation of Josh's joke. As the discussion continues to unfold, however, a number of divergent positions with respect to the restaurant become evident, with these possibilities serving to implicitly display the participants' orientations to particular material underpinnings of their relationships to food consumption. This can be observed first in Josh's continuation of his assessment of the restaurant, as he claims in overlap with continuing laughter and talk from other participants (lines 14-21) that the combination of low prices and large portion sizes on offer at the restaurant make it "the right

place" (line 21). It is noteworthy, however, that Josh reveals that he is not a patron of the restaurant even as he positively assesses it. His account for not eating at the restaurant ("because I can't" – line 16) is an apparent reference back to a revelation he made earlier in the discussion that he follows a Kosher diet, which positions him as being able to make food consumption choices in accordance with religious observances. This sense of food consumption as a matter of individual choice is further reflected in the contrast between his use of the first person singular pronoun "I" in reporting his own non-patronage of the restaurant (line 16), and his indeterminate use of "you" in assessing the merits of the restaurant as a destination for others (lines 19 and 21; also see Excerpts 2 and 3 for similar uses of "you"). In addition, Josh's assessment establishes a specific metric by which his earlier characterization of "the cheapest restaurant in this world" (line 1) can be understood, as he refers to a meal costing five rand (approximately US$0.55). This implies that paying more than this for a meal would not be inconceivable, particularly given his claim that he does not eat at this particular restaurant.

Following further laughter that shows Chris and Jen's continuing appreciation of Josh's joking assessment (lines 22 and 23) Melissa produces a disagreeing counter-assessment of the restaurant (line 25). Although produced and responded to as a further joke, as shown by Melissa's own subsequent laughter (line 25), and Julie's responsive laughter (lines 27-28), this assessment introduces a competing position with respect to the restaurant. That is, it proposes that the same combination of low prices and large portions on which Josh has just based his positive assessment could also be grounds for concern, and thus the basis for a decision *not* to eat at the restaurant – which implicitly presupposes the availability of other, more desirable, food consumption options. Julie's head nods as she laughs along with Melissa provide evidence that,

in addition to appreciating the humor in Melissa's assessment, she has also recognized and is displaying agreement with its logic in this regard.

Starting in overlap with this laughter (initially on line 26 and then, restarting on line 29), Chris produces another position with respect to the restaurant, as he states his appreciation for it in the face of evidence (based on what he treats as the authority of Indian people to assess the restaurant, which serves ostensibly Indian food) that it is not worthy of appreciation. This implies a further basis for eating at the restaurant that contrasts with the previously proposed price and portion sizes, namely appreciation for the taste of the food. In response, Josh displays his agreement (line 32), and Jen produces an upgraded agreeing assessment (line 33) that is consistent with Pomerantz's (1984) observations about the use of upgrades as a means of displaying strong agreement. As was the case with the positions produced previously, Chris, Jen and Julie's displays of appreciation for the food at the restaurant are underpinned by an implicit sense of individual choice with respect to food consumption, with Chris's use of the singular personal pronoun "I" again contributing to its production as such. This sense of choice can similarly be observed in the final exchange in the excerpt, in which Melissa aligns with the proposal of appreciation for the food as a basis for choosing a place to eat, while disputing Chris and Jen's claims about the quality of the food at this particular restaurant (lines 34-35), and Julie responds by implying that Melissa's stance in this regard was based on a less-than-optimal choice of which item to order off the menu, as shown by her suggestion to try a different item (line 36).

Thus, in the course of the food-related jokes and humor produced in Excerpts 3 and 4, a range of competing bases are offered for particular food consumption practices, including health, cost, portion sizes, and taste. However, the individual basis of decision-making in this regard,

along with the sheer availability of a range of choices, is collaboratively produced as taken-for-granted throughout. Once again, this implicit sense of individual choice contrasts with the explicit complaints about a shared and systemic lack of available choices collaboratively produced by the participants in Excerpts 1 and 2. In light of this, the possibility of joking about food as a discursive practice may be linked to a particular material position that some of the participants (such as those in Excerpts 3 and 4) could take for granted, but that other participants (such as those in Excerpts 1 and 2) showed explicit awareness of *not* being able to take for granted.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have addressed the discursive and interactional practices employed by participants in their food-related talk, while linking these practices to relevant material positions occupied and displayed by the participants. In particular, we have contrasted food-related troubles-talk with food-related jokes and humor, and have examined how a range of features of the interactions (including patterns of alignment and dis-alignment, pronoun use, laughter, and aspects of the formulation of utterances) contribute to the production of matters being talked about as shared and systemic versus individual, and as explicitly-addressed versus implicitly taken-for-granted. These contrasts are indicative of divergent conditions of possibility (Foucault 1981) related to the participants' socio-economic locations, which provide for particular ways-of-being and hence discursive resources (Sims-Schouten et al. 2007), with respect to food talk. Thus, being a financial aid recipient, and sharing a common set of challenges with others in a similar position, provides for the possibility of talking about these troubles in ways that those in more privileged positions may have difficulty doing. Conversely, having sufficient financial

resources to be able to take food choices for granted provides for the achievement of the kind of light-hearted orientation towards food consumption that those who face food-related struggles on a daily basis may find difficult to accomplish (notwithstanding their ability to use humor and laughter in a different way, as a means of displaying troubles-resistance). As a result, although these divergences may appear small at the surface of the talk in which they become visible, their basis can be located in substantial material factors, which indicates the utility of fine-grained analyses of talk-in-interaction for examining issues of inequality (also see Sims-Schouten et al. 2007; Whitehead 2013).

These contrasts between the food-related talk produced by the different groups of students point to the importance of further research investigating the implications of everyday inequalities (including those related to food) for social relations among students. Thus, we might ask whether and how students with orientations toward food (or other everyday needs) as asymmetrical as those we have described might engage with each other in everyday social settings, particularly in light of the significance of mealtimes, and food-related settings, as sites for social encounters (see, for example, Ochs and Shohet 2006). For example, can students who take food acquisition choices for granted engage in social relations on an equal footing with students who treat food issues as being bound up with struggling to acquire sufficient (and sufficient quality) food? If the university is to be a space where students gain a well-rounded education not only via formal classroom instruction, but also by genuinely engaging with others who come from different backgrounds, the inequalities in the ways in which different groups of students engage with everyday issues such as food, and the attendant potential consequences for relationships across socio-economic lines, must surely constitute a source of concern. Thus,

while our findings are suggestive of important links between material positions and discursive and interactional practices, much work remains to be done in this regard.

Appendix: Transcription Conventions

Based on the Jefferson (2004) transcription system.

(0.6)	Numbers in parentheses indicate time elapsed to the nearest tenth of a second.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a brief interval (approximately one tenth of a second).
=	Equal signs indicate no gap or break between words.
[	A left bracket indicates onset of overlapping talk.
.	A full-stop indicates falling or final intonation.
,	A comma indicates continuing intonation.
?	A question mark indicates rising or questioning intonation.
!	And exclamation mark indicates an animated tone.
wo::rd	Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately preceding sound, with more colons indicating longer prolongation.
<u>word</u>	Underlining all or part of a word indicates stress, via pitch and/or amplitude.
(words)	Words in parentheses indicates uncertain hearing and/or speaker designation, and represent the transcriber's best guess at what was said and/or who said it.
( )	Spaces in parentheses indicate untranscribable talk, with longer spaces reflecting longer durations of untranscribable talk.
((words))	Words in double parentheses indicate transcribers' descriptions.
WORDS	Capitalization indicates utterances that are markedly louder than surrounding talk.

°words°	Degree signs enclose utterances that are markedly quieter than surrounding talk.
>words<	"Greater than" and "less than" symbols enclose talk that is produced markedly more quickly than surrounding talk.
word-	A dash indicates a cut-off.
.hhh	Dot-prefixed "h"s indicate an in-breath; "h"s without a dot indicate an out-breath.
(h)	Parenthesized "h"s indicate plosiveness, associated with laughter, crying, etc.

Notes

* We would like to thank Brett Bowman and two anonymous *Text & Talk* reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We would also like to acknowledge the participants of the focus groups on which our analysis is based, without whom this paper would not have been possible.

1. In keeping with the conversation analytic approach on which we draw for our analysis (as described below), we have not provided further demographic details of the participants, and nor do we routinely identify participants' demographic categories in our analyses. This practice is a subject of debate that is beyond the scope of the present paper, but involves adopting a principle of "holding off from using all sorts of identities which one might want to use…until and unless such an identity is visibly consequential in what happens" (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998: 5). Thus, any analytic claims about the significance of such categories should be grounded in participants' orientations to their relevance, rather than, as an analyst, categorizing participants in particular ways and then using those categories to account for their conduct (also see Schegloff 1997).
2. For example, it was also prevalent in discussions of topics such as university fees, transportation, and housing.
3. This focus group was conducted during the time of the global food price crisis in 2008, and John thus appears to be referring to this crisis here.

References

Africa, Hugh P. 2005. Audit: Student failure, report to UKZN. Durban, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Antaki, Charles & Sue Widdicombe. 1998. Identity as an achievement and as a tool. In Charles Antaki & Sue Widdicombe (eds.), *Identites in talk*, 1–14. London: Sage.

Avirgan, Tony. 2006. South Africa's economic gap grows wider while Brazil's narrows slightly. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Bhorat, Haroon, Carlene van der Westhuizen & Toughedah Jacobs. 2009. Income and non-income inequality in post-apartheid South Africa: What are the drivers and possible policy interventions? Cape Town: Development Policy Research Unit.

Bull, Peter & Anita Fetzer. 2006. Who are we and who are you? The strategic use of forms of address in political interviews. *Text & Talk* 26(1). 3–37.

Department of Education. 1997. White paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Durrheim, Kevin, Kirsty Trotter, Desiree Manicom & Laurence Piper. 2004. From exclusion to informal segregation: The limits to racial transformation at the University of Natal. *Social Dynamics* 30. 141–169.

Edwards, Derek. 2000. Extreme case formulations: Softeners, investment, and doing nonliteral. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 33(4). 347–373.

Firfirey, Nazir & Ronell Carolissen. 2010. "I keep myself clean. At least when you see me, you don't know I am poor": Student experiences of poverty in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(6). 987–1002.

Foucault, Michel. 1981. The order of discourse. In Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the text: A post-structural anthology*, 48–78. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Glenn, Phillip. 2003. *Laughter in interaction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Íñigo-Mora, Isabel. 2004. On the use of the personal pronoun *we* in communities. *Journal of Language and Politics* 3(1). 27–52.

Jama, Mpho P., Mabokang L. E. Mapesela & Adriana A. Beylefeld. 2008. Theoretical perspectives on factors affecting the academic performance of students. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 22 (5). 992–1005.

Jefferson, Gail. 1984. On the organization of laughter in talk about troubles. In J. Maxwell Atkinson & John Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*, 346–369. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Jefferson, Gail. 2004. Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In Gene H. Lerner (ed.), *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation*, 13–23. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Jordaan, Yolanda & Melanie Wiese. 2010. The role of ethnicity in the higher education institution selection process. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(4). 538–554.

Letseka, Moeketsi & Simeon Maile. 2008. High university drop-out rates: A threat to South Africa's future. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Lumadi, Thinamaano E. & K. Charles Mampuru. 2010. Managing change in the student affairs divisions of higher education institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(5). 716–729.

Maile, Simeon (ed.). 2008. Education and poverty reduction strategies: Issues of policy coherence. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Munro, Nicholas, Michael Quayle, Heather Simpson & Shelley Barnsley. in press. Hunger for knowledge: Food insecurity amongst students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. *Perspectives in Education*.

Ochs, Elinor & Merav Shohet. 2006. The cultural structuring of mealtime socialization. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 111. 35–49.

Pattman, Rob. 2007. Student identities, and researching these, in a newly 'racially' merged university in South Africa. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 10(4). 473–492.

Pomerantz, Anita. 1984. Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. Maxwell Atkinson & John Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*, 57–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Potter, Jonathan & Alexa Hepburn. 2005. Qualitative interviews in psychology: Problems and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2. 281–307.

Prego-Vázquez, Gabriela. 2007. Frame conflict and social inequality in the workplace: Professional and local discourse struggles in employee/customer interactions. *Discourse & Society* 18(3). 295–335.

Puchta, Claudia & Jonathan Potter. 2004. *Focus group practice*. London: Sage.

Sacks, Harvey. 1992. *Lectures on conversation*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff & Gail Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn taking in conversation. *Language* 50. 696–735.

Sanders, David & Mickey Chopra. 2006. Key challenges to achieving health for all in an inequitable society: The case of South Africa. *American Journal of Public Health* 96(1). 73–78.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 1997. Whose text, whose context? *Discourse and Society* 8(2). 165–187.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 2007a. *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 2007b. A tutorial on membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39. 462–482.

Seekings, Jeremy & Nicoli Nattrass. 2005. *Class, race and inequality in South Africa*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sims-Schouten, Wendy, Sarah C. E. Riley & Carla Willig. 2007. Critical realism in discourse analysis: A presentation of a systematic method of analysing using women's talk of motherhood, childcare and female employment as an example. *Theory & Psychology* 17(1). 101–124.

Van Der Valk, Ineke. 2003. Right-wing parliamentary discourse on immigration in France. *Discourse & Society* 14(3). 309–348.

Van Dijk, Teun A. 1999. Critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis. *Discourse & Society* 10(4). 459–460.

Weaver-Hightower, Marcus B. 2011. Why education researchers should take school food seriously. *Educational Researcher* 40(1). 15–21.

Whitehead, Kevin A. 2013. Race-class intersections as interactional resources in post-apartheid South Africa. In Celine Marie Pascale (ed.), *Social inequality and the politics of representation: A global landscape*, 49–63. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.