Getting to know you: Teasing as an invitation to intimacy in initial interactions

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Abstract  
It is commonly assumed that teasing is restricted to encounters among intimates or close acquaintances. As a result of examining initial interactions among (American and Australian) speakers of English, however, this article shows that teasing also occurs between persons who are becoming acquainted. Analysis reveals that tease sequences unfold across three actions that constitute the tease as an invitation to intimacy: a teasable action on the part of the target, the tease proper and a moment of interactionally generated affiliation. Given teasing is one way of criticising another, it constitutes a potential breach of tact or interactional propriety. In initial interactions, however, participants can construe this potential impropriety as an invitation to intimacy, as it involves the proposal of a shared ironic stance that may be either accepted or declined by the target of the tease.

Keywords  
American English, Australian English, conversation analysis, criticism, getting acquainted, interactional pragmatics, relationships, teasing

Introduction  
Teasing involves directing (ostensibly) playful or jocular mocking jibes or taunts at others. It combines elements of provocation with non-seriousness through a figurative setting up or cutting down of the target. Yet although teasing may be construed as playful or done
in jest by participants, it can also be characterised by others, in particular the target of the tease, as (covertly) aggressive. In other words, while teasing may be construed as amusing or entertaining for participants (Cekaite and Aronsson, 2004; Margutti, 2007), it may also be meant to annoy or irritate (Pawluk, 1989), or to cause embarrassment or shame in the target (Kowalski, 2000), particularly in interactions among children and adolescents (Pexman et al., 2005; Tholander, 2002). This is because teasing is a way of criticising another – it involves finding fault with the target. Such faults may include, for instance, an (alleged) weakness or imperfection in character or physical appearance, a mistake or slip-up, or a minor offence or misdeed on the part of the target (Armstrong, 1992; Drew, 1987). However, because this criticising or fault-finding is framed as (ostensibly) non-serious by means of various combinations of laughter, phonetic or facial cues, exaggeration and incongruity (Drew, 1987; Ford and Fox, 2010; Haugh, 2014), the teaser can disclaim responsibility for causing hurt or offence through subsequent claims to have been ‘just kidding’, ‘only joking’, ‘just teasing’, and so on (Haugh, 2016).¹

Teasing has been studied in a variety of different situated contexts, ranging from everyday encounters between family members, friends and acquaintances (e.g. Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Drew, 1987) through to encounters within particular communities (e.g. Queen, 2005), schools (e.g. Tholander, 2002) and other institutional contexts (e.g. Franzen and Aronsson, 2013). This body of research indicates that teasing can be deployed to accomplish a wide range of interactional work. Much of the research on teasing to date has focused on the ways in which it constitutes a form of social control through indicating moral transgressions (Drew, 1987) and socialising members to conform to group norms (Franzén and Aronsson, 2013; Miller, 1986). It has also been suggested that teasing may sometimes be involved in accomplishing sensitive or delicate social actions, ranging from complimenting and thanking (Mills and Babrow, 2003) through to reproaching and complaining (Alberts, 1990; Straehle, 1993). Other research on teasing has focused on the way in which it can be used to negotiate relationship boundaries between individuals (Mills and Babrow, 2003) and across groups of individuals (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Margutti, 2007), as well to manage the status of members within an in-group hierarchy (Decapua and Boxer, 1999).

The vast majority of research about teasing has focused on interactions among participants who have some sort of ongoing relationship, whether it be between intimates, family members, friends, workplace colleagues or schoolmates. This has led some researchers to claim that teasing is limited to intimate or close relationships (e.g. Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997: 287; DiCioccio, 2010: 350; Keltner et al., 2001: 241; Kowalski, 2000: 239; Kowalski et al., 2007: 189; Straehle, 1993: 226), although others have been more circumspect about making such claims (e.g. Drew, 1987: 220). Indeed, most studies of initial interactions between previously unacquainted persons have not noted the occurrence of teasing (Maynard and Zimmermann, 1984; Stokoe, 2010; Svennevig, 1999), with the exception of work by Haugh (2010, 2011, 2014) on initial interactions among (Australian) speakers of English, and Phillips (1975) on North American Indians in the Plateau and Plains regions of the Northwestern United States.² This is likely due to the preference for agreeability in getting acquainted (Haugh, 2015), that is, the emphasis on establishing ‘some degree of familiarity, solidarity and affection’ (Svennevig, 2014: 322). Teasing may be an especially risky action in initial interactions, given that the
social action of criticising another is prototypically regarded as ‘face threatening’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 39, 66), and so is recurrently delivered through a ‘dispreferred’ turn design (Pillet-Shore, 2016, 2017; Pomerantz, 1984a: 78). Finding fault via teasing another with whom one is not yet acquainted thus constitutes a potential impropriety (Haugh, 2015) in the context of initial encounters in which participants are working towards the interactional accomplishment of relational connection or affection.

As Jefferson et al. (1987) have noted, however, the introduction of ‘improper talk’ can also exploit the convention that such talk indexes ‘relaxed, unguarded, spontaneous, i.e. intimate interaction’ (p. 160). By introducing such talk, the speaker thereby orients to the current interaction as an informal or intimate one in which producing such talk is licensed, albeit temporarily. Such talk can also constitute an invitation to intimacy, as ‘by introducing such talk, a speaker may be initiating a move into intimate interaction from a status [s/]he perceives as non-intimate so far’ (p. 160, original emphasis), as it proffers an opportunity for the ‘co-participants to produce talk together whereby they can see themselves as intimate’ (p. 160). However, while Jefferson et al. (1987) focused primarily on instances of ‘crude or obscene language or reference’ and ‘rudeness’ (p. 192, fn.7), their formulation of ‘improper talk’ was pointedly construed more broadly to include ‘something which breaches conventional standards of courtesy, propriety, tact, ethics, commonality, etc. etc., the breach in conventional standards at least potentially being offensive to other parties to the interaction’ (p. 160, emphasis added). In subsequent work, Beach and Glenn (2011) have extended the notion of improper talk to include criticising others, given the latter may be treated as a ‘potential impropriety’ or ‘possible indiscretion’ even in cases in which one is talking about a third party (p. 221). In the context of initial interactions, then, a tease directed at a co-present recipient arguably constitutes a form of ‘improper talk’, given it implements criticism or finding fault in that target, albeit a criticism that is framed as (ostensibly) non-serious. However, this potential impropriety can be construed by participants who are not well acquainted as a ‘bid’ for intimacy (Beach and Glenn, 2011) that may be either accepted or declined (cf. Pillet-Shore, 2006).

In this article, we thus explore the possibility that teasing in initial interactions among (American and Australian) speakers of English is an action that invites intimacy in the course of the activity of getting acquainted. We begin by first outlining the data set and methods drawn upon in our analysis. Following this, We then show that teasing does indeed routinely occur in initial interactions in the course of analysing how teasing invites intimacy in such contexts through a recurrent three-part sequence of actions. We next examine in more detail responses to these teases and how the invitations to intimacy implemented through teases may be accepted or declined by the target. We briefly summarise our findings and highlight possible areas for future research in our final.

**Data and method**

The initial data set from which the instances of teasing were taken consists of 30 initial encounters between previously unacquainted American and Australian speakers of English, including 15 Australian–Australian dyads, 10 American–American dyads and 5
American–Australian dyads. A balanced mixture of same-gender and cross-gender encounters were collected, and the participants ranged in age from 17 through to 70 years, although most were in their early 20s to mid-30s.

The initial interactions themselves were all collected using essentially the same protocol implemented by Svennevig (1999). Participants who responded to a call to be involved in a project about social interaction were taken into a room where it was explained to them they were being recorded for the purposes of studying communication. No instructions were given to participants about what they should talk about. In most cases, the participants were invited to stop the recording after approximately 20 minutes to enable them to return to work or classes, given the recordings themselves were made in educational institutions, but the actual recordings vary in length from 15 and a half minutes to 1 hour and 50 minutes. While these meetings were pre-arranged, the talk produced by the participants was spontaneous (i.e. not scripted or directed in any way), and the participants were independently motivated to get to know the other person, as evidenced by the fact that some of the participants subsequently contacted each other again.

A total of 34 teasing sequences were first identified by the authors through repeated viewing of these initial encounters. Relevant segments of the interaction surrounding the teases were then transcribed according to standard conversation analysis (CA) conventions (Jefferson, 2004b). Following previous studies of teasing using CA methods (Drew, 1987) and interactional pragmatics (Haugh, 2014), the design of the teases, their sequential position, as well as antecedents and responses to teases were examined in detail.

How teasing invites intimacy in initial interactions

It is important to first note our observation that the social action of teasing did in fact transpire in these initial interactions. Out of the 30 initial interactions we examined, 24 of them featured one (or more) teasing sequence. The teases themselves were produced by both female and male speakers and were directed at both female and male targets of varying ages. This directly challenges the common assumption that teasing only occurs in close or intimate relationships.

After establishing that teasing did indeed regularly occur in our set of initial interactions, we then proceeded to examine the sequences through which the action of teasing is accomplished. Our analysis revealed that, in these initial interactions, teasing sequences recurrently unfolded through a three-part series of actions. In the following two subsections, we first examine the design of teasing sequences and then how this design can be expanded when the final affiliative action is delayed. We also discuss how this three-part sequence is constitutive of these teases as invitations to intimacy in the context of getting acquainted.

Three-part teasing sequences as invitations to intimacy

The teasing sequences we examined recurrently unfolded across three actions:

1. Teasable: a triggering action by the tease target that affords the tease
2. Tease: a teasing action directed at the tease target
3. Affiliation: mutual ratification of the non-seriousness of the tease
The way in which the tease proper constitutes an invitation to intimacy is dependent on both its relationship with the prior teasable, and the following shared display of (momentary) affiliation on the part of the two parties: the former licences a mocking, critical stance toward the target that is implemented by the teaser through the tease, while through the latter, the target indicates his or her tacit understanding of this mocking, critical stance as (ostensibly) non-serious, and thus an opportunity for them to share in this momentary lapse in ‘conventional standards of courtesy, propriety, tact’ (Jefferson et al., 1987: 160) in the course of getting acquainted.

In analysing teasing as constituting a series of three actions, we can draw an analogy with the three-part series of actions described by Jefferson (1987) in relation to repair. Just as ‘anything in talk may be treated as in need of repair’ (Schegloff, 2007: 100), so too may anything be treated as a possible teasable. In a similar way to a repair sequence, then, a teasing sequence is not explicitly underway when a potential tease source is produced, but rather when the second action in the sequence, the (other-initiated) tease proper, is produced (cf. Jefferson, 1987: 88). It is then ratified as a non-serious tease through the teaser and tease target jointly, either concurrently or in overlap, displaying an affiliative stance through laughing or smiling at the prior tease. In other words, it is through the tease proper and the subsequent affiliative action that the teasable action becomes part of a three-part series of actions. Our analysis of teasing sequences thus reaffirms Drew’s (1987) analysis of teases as ‘sequentially “second”s to some prior utterance(s) of the one who is teased’ (p. 233).

In the remainder of this section, we explore in further detail how, through this three-part sequence of actions, teasing is accomplished as an invitation to intimacy in these initial encounters.

In Excerpt 1, for instance, we can observe how this basic three-part sequence underpins the interactional accomplishment of teasing as an invitation to intimacy. The excerpt is taken from an interaction between Natalie and Kathy, two Australians in their mid-20s. Natalie is asking about Kathy’s part-time job at a theme park near the Gold Coast.

(1) AGA: NJKR: 2:28

92  N: >how long have you been< (0.2) been going
93   there on weekends,
94         (0.2)
95  K: tsk u::m (0.2) well I sta:rted off just going
96       there during holidays?
97  N: mm.
98         (.)
99  K: -> tsk (0.4) ↓but that was (1.2) eight years
100     ago #now#
101  (0.9)
102 fs:so::f=
103  N: -> =feeling old? Hhha
104  K: -> ye(hh)p I a(hh)m HA HA HA HA [ha ha]
105  N:                             [fsudd]enly: when you
106  K: [.hh ha suddenly o:ld ] ↑yea:h (. ) ↓yea:h but
107    u:m my first- (0.3) when I (.) sort of started
108     going to uni:
The tease proper arises in line 103 when Natalie proposes that Kathy must feel old, perhaps in contrast to the young children and teens who frequent such theme parks. The proposal is recognisable as non-serious, and thus as a jocular tease, from the incongruity that arises between her assessment of Kathy as feeling, and thus looking old, and the fact that Kathy still looks relatively young (Antaki, 1998), as well as the turn-final post-completion stance-marking laughter through which Natalie invites Kathy to laugh at her proposal (Jefferson, 1979). Close examination of the local sequential environment of this tease indicates, however, that it constitutes the second action of a three-part series.

The tease proper is formulated as a non-serious upshot of the immediately preceding stand-alone ‘so’ (Raymond, 2004) proffered by Kathy at line 102 with audible smile voice (Jefferson, 2004a). This stand-alone ‘so’, which follows a noticeable gap (line 101) during which Natalie has not offered any audible uptake to Kathy’s response (lines 95–96, 99–100) to her prior question (lines 92–93) is designed to prompt a response from Natalie. Kathy’s answer itself, the duration formulation at the end of line 99 to line 100, is delayed relative to the point in the interaction – starting at line 94 – when it might have otherwise have been initially relevantly performed, including by a 1.2-second pause (line 99) prior to its completion. Casting Kathy as ‘old’ is clearly an opportunistic move on Natalie’s part (Armstrong, 1992), which is formulated as touched off or triggered by an opportunity proffered by Kathy adumbrating the upshot of her response to Natalie’s question, but is also, more importantly, responsive to the way in which Kathy displays her recalling (Drew, 1989) of how long she has been working there as something that has to be worked through and discovered for herself.

Kathy’s affiliative response in line 104 ratifies the teasing characterisation of herself as ‘old’, treating Natalie’s preceding utterance as a non-serious exaggeration (Drew, 2003) by producing her agreement with interpolated laughter and post-completion laughter. Natalie continues by making reference to the activity of thinking about things that make one ‘feel old’ (lines 105–106) that she had teasingly prompted Kathy to engage in, but this is accomplished as non-serious through its delivery with hearable smile voice (Jefferson, 2004a), and Kathy’s subsequent laughter and agreement (line 107), before a return to serious talk (Schegloff, 2001). As further evidence of their affiliation, at line 107 tease target Kathy chooses to recycle two key words from Natalie’s preceding utterances (‘suddenly’ from line 105 and ‘old’ from line 103) as part of an agreeing utterance, before returning to her prior project in which she is telling Natalie about her experiences working at the theme park (lines 107–109). In this way, Kathy and Natalie index their joint orientation to being aligned in momentary affiliation (Pillet-Shore, 2006) by accomplishing a shared (albeit exaggerated) experience of ‘feeling old’ (despite both being visibly relatively young in age) as a method for claiming ‘particularistic comembership’ (Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Pillet-Shore, 2016).

The mocking, critical stance, which was initially targeted at Kathy subsequent to her displaying momentary difficulty in recalling how long she has worked at the theme park, is thus interactionally accomplished as not only one with respect to which they display their shared amusement, but one that is applicable to both of them. In this way, the tease is jointly accomplished as touched off by the tease target’s prior utterances, and subsequently ratified by the tease target’s affiliative responses, along with those of the teaser.
It thus constitutes a potential impropriety that does not attract sanction, but rather demonstrably invites intimacy.

In some instances, the teases are designed as touched off by a sanctionable matter that is external to the current, ongoing talk-in-interaction that is being referenced in current talk. In Excerpt 2, Tim has evidently arrived a little late for his pre-arranged meeting with Paula.

As their encounter begins, Tim offers an apology-priming (Owen, 1983) admission of his lateness as a potentially complainable matter (Schegloff, 2005) for Paula (line 7),
followed by an account for his lateness (line 10). Paula responds in lines 11 to 12 by disagreeing with there being any need to apologise (Robinson, 2004). She then construes Tim’s lateness as a welcomed opportunity as it enabled her to have a quick smoke (lines 12–14). She designs her account as to why there is no need for Tim to apologise as delicate (Lerner, 2013), framing it as a potential misdeed through interpolated aspiration particles in line 14 (Potter and Hepburn, 2010) accompanied by her smiling as she shrugs in line 15 (Ford and Fox, 2010). In this way, she treats smoking as a guilty pleasure that is a transgressive or sanctionable activity, while also inviting Tim to treat it lightly.

This action by Paula affords an opportunity for a tease by Tim in line 17, in which he indicates familiarity with the furtive pleasures of smoking by formulating it as a ‘crafty ciggie’, followed by turn-final laughter that invites laughter from Paula (Jefferson, 1979). Paula immediately affiliates with this tease through laughter and agreement (line 19) (Drew, 1987), nodding and smiling (line 20), and extends the tacit mocking stance through her subsequent formulation of the smoke as ‘a £cheeky£ breath of fresh air’ (line 21), which is accompanied by a visible eye roll (line 22) (Ford and Fox, 2010). Thus Paula’s admission of having indulged in a quick smoke, and Tim’s subsequent teasing action in which he ironically mocks her for this transgression (Clift, 1999), enable these two participants to bilaterally transform this sequence into an opportunity for affiliation in which they have interactionally accomplished a shared ironic stance with respect to an activity that is treated as (ostensibly) transgressive, yet one in which they both claim to share pleasure.

Finally, in some instances the tease is touched off by displays of uneasiness and disfluency on the part of the target. In Excerpt 3, which is taken from near the start of the interaction, Zane, an American exchange student, has just found out that an acquaintance of Jake, an Australian student, comes from Stockton, California. This turns out to be very close to where Zane himself lives.

(3) CAAT: AmAus18: 0:42

51 Z: how do you know someone that lives in Stockton.=
52 J: =ah do you know tumblr
53 (0.8)
54 Z: yea:h.
55 J: °hh°
56 Z: alright
57 (0.4)
58 J: ↑through ↓that (. ) [through] a fandom [ it’s d-=
59 Z: =alright] [°.hhh°
60 J: =doesn’t really [mat]er hhh=
61 Z: [hh ]
62 Z: =and what do they do in Stockton? °hh hh°
63 (.)
64 J: --> he lives the:re.
65 Z: =yea:h? (0.4) and [jus’-]
66 J: [ ah: ]
67 (.)
68 Z: --> *↓just tumbles* (↑*deadpan)) [figure 2a]
69 (0.5)
Prior to this excerpt Jake has disclosed that he has a friend in Stockton, but then goes on to characterise the place as a ‘ghetto’, with the latter being delivered with infiltrating laugh tokens (data not shown). In this way, the topic of Jake’s friendship with someone in Stockton is set up as a delicate one about which he appears to display a somewhat ‘embarrassed’ stance (Sandlund, 2004). Jake displays further discomfort when he is asked how he knows this person (line 51). Jake manifests reluctance to disclose any specific information, preserving a gross level of granularity by indexing only that it is through a ‘tumblr’ ‘fandom’ (line 58), treating the topic as something about which he does not wish to elaborate further (line 60). The tease in question arises subsequent to Zane’s follow-up question about what Jake’s acquaintance in Stockton does (line 62). Jake responds at line 64 with a hearably non-informative response. This seemingly vacuous response (note that this information was already established prior to line 51), following a prior moment of evident delicacy (Lerner, 2013), thus affords an opportunity for teasing, which Zane takes up in line 68 in suggesting that Jake’s acquaintance ‘just tumbles’, thereby ironically alluding to the relationship having been formed through tumblr. This suggestion is delivered with a markedly lower pitch and compressed pitch range that is hearable as ‘deadpan’. This is recognised and ratified as non-serious by Jake, albeit after a brief pause (line 70), through smiling, breathy laughter (Jefferson et al., 1987), and a ‘no’-prefaced return to a serious response to Zane’s question in line 62, which thereby treats Zane’s preceding candidate answer as non-serious (Schegloff, 2001). Jake’s construal of the candidate answer as non-serious is ratified by Zane, who mirrors Jake’s smile (line 71). While the mocking suggestion is ostensibly directed at a third party (i.e. Jake’s acquaintance in Stockton), it also hearably implements a mocking stance towards Jake himself with respect to his prior unforthcoming response, and
perhaps towards his presumed reliance on tumblr to make friends as well. This licenses
the inference that the tease constitutes a mild sanction of Jake’s lapse with respect to
what is expected when getting acquainted, that is, providing responses that engender the
establishment of common ground, promote sequence expansion and progressivity
(Stivers and Robinson, 2006) and do not simply state the obvious (Armstrong, 1992).

Overall, then, tease sequences in initial interactions were found to recurrently unfold
in a three-part sequence: a teasable, an action on the part of the tease target that is treated
as affording a subsequent tease, followed by the tease proper, which then occasions affil-
iation through mutual ratification of the non-seriousness of the tease. In the following
section, we consider a variation on this three-part series in which a display of affiliation
following the tease was delayed.

Delayed displays of affiliation in teasing sequences

Another trajectory for teasing sequences involved delayed displays of the moment of
shared affiliation. These extended sequences involved a disavowal of serious intent using
expressions such as ‘(just) kidding’ (Haugh, 2016) or delayed laughter on the part of the
teer (Holt, 2016), following the tease proper. Whether such disavowals or delayed
laughter were designed to pre-empt or repair a disaffiliative response to the tease from
the target remains equivocal, but they were recurrently followed by a moment of joint,
concurrent laughter through which the tease was ratified as non-serious.

In Excerpt 4, the tease arises in a self-presentation sequence in which Kay, an
American postgraduate student, is asking Gillian, an Australian, what she is studying in
her undergraduate degree.

(4) CAAT: AmAus22 10:45

304 K: so what are you: studying [w] for your<
305 (0.4)
306 G: me?: I’m doing a: bachelor of language and
307 linguistics:.
308 K: okay? (. [so ] what does that actually mean?
309 K: |[pursed lips] smiles|
310 G: [so] -> that actually means< okay language is (. language
311 K: | smiles [figure 3c] |
312 G: you pick a language to major in
313 (0.4)
314 G: [my case] it’s Italian?
315 K: [ okay. ]
316 G: [nods without smile] [figure 3d]
317 (0.4)
318 K: okay.
319 (. )
320 K: -> uh:: [>and then<]
321 K: [↑why. ]
325  K:  |frowns and fixes gaze|  [figure 3e]
326  (.)
327  G:  hm- °why?°=
328  K:  °kidding° (.)
329  K:  |moves back and shakes head slightly|  [figure 3f]
330  G:  |gaze shifts to K|
331  K:  I’m ju[s(h)- ha ha ha .hh ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ]=
332  K:  |    smiles [figure 3g]   |
333  G:  ->  [ha ha ha .hh ha wh(h)y  £because I ca:n.f]
The tease in question arises in line 324 when Kay solicits an account about Gillian’s choice of language. Soliciting an account in this way also implicates criticism about this choice by ‘index[ing] a measure of epistemic access to the accountable event and communicat[ing] a stance that it does not accord with common sense and thus is possibly inappropriate or unwarranted’ (Bolden and Robinson, 2011: 115). This account solicitation and implicated criticism is delivered as a seemingly serious challenge through both its markedly rising pitch and Kay’s shift from smiling (line 313), to a more neutral facial expression (line 318), through to frowning and concurrent fixing of her gaze with Gillian (line 325) as she utters ‘↑why’. It is thus delivered as ‘deadpan’ in the sense that its pitch range is markedly compressed, similar to the tease in Excerpt 3. While Gillian’s full repeat in line 327 treats Kay’s questioning action as problematic (Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2010), Kay herself delivers a disavowal of non-serious intent in sotto voce (line 328), although she maintains a serious facial expression (line 329). As Gillian returns her gaze to Kay in response (line 330), Kay launches a repeat of her claim to non-serious intent that dissolves into laughter and concurrent smiling (lines 331–332). Gillian synchronises her laughter and smiling with that of Kay (lines 333–334), and offers a non-serious account as to why she is doing Italian (line 336). The teasing side sequence is then closed as Gillian returns to the business of the self-presentation sequence originally launched by Kay (data not shown). Thus, the claim to be ‘(just) kidding’ is constitutive of this tease (Haugh, 2016), as the initial delivery of the criticism-implicative account solicitation is subsequently revealed to be a momentary pretence. The tease itself is occasioned, in part at least, by the way in which Gillian’s tautological response (line 312) to Kay’s inquiry constitutes an instance of stating the obvious (Armstrong, 1992), although Kay’s non-serious stance is visibly foreshadowed in her prior response to Gillian’s report (lines 306–307) being delivered with pursed lips leading into a smile (lines 308–309). Through the tease, then, Kay sanctions Gillian for her under-informative response. This mocking, critical stance is construed as licensed by Gillian’s prior response, but subsequently treated as a locus for shared laughter through which they momentarily affiliate with this mocking stance towards Gillian’s choice of language.

In the final excerpt that we examine in this section, the way in which the tease constitutes a possible sanction of a prior interactional transgression is somewhat more nuanced. In Excerpt 5, Jane and Isaac have only just begun talking. Jane’s question about whether Isaac is also American thus nominates their national identities as the first topic of conversation:

(5) CAAT: AmAm05: 0:08

14 J: .hhh so you’re American?
15 J: |smiles with raised [figure 4a] eyebrows and tilted head|
16 I: yeah [I
18 J: [↑oh::..
19 I: -> that’s: (.) was the requirement for this right?  
[figure 4b] [figure 4c]  
20 I: [glances at camera] [smiles]  
21 J: ↑right.  
22 J: [figure 4d]  
23 I: yeah hhheh=  
24 J: =I’m just *pretending to be American.* (‘*deadpan*)  
[figure 4e]  
25 J: gaze shifts away  
26 I: [oh you’re pre-]  
27 I: [figure 4f]  
28 J: [no I’m just] kidding  
29 J: [figure 4g]  
30 I: [hahahaha .hh]  
31 I: [figure 4h]  
32 J: [hahahaha. Hh]  
33 J: smiles  
34 I: [do ]ing a great job.  
35 J: [no:]  
36 (0.3)  
37 J: ↑thank.s. [do I sound American?  
38 I: [yeah  
39 I: [figure 4i]  
40 J: =hh hahaha .hh well, h- um (0.4) tsk how are you  
41 my name’s Jane?  

The tease in question arises in line 24 when Jane claims to be ‘pretending to be American’ despite having a hearable American accent. Similar to the teases in Excerpts 3 and 4, this claim is delivered with a markedly different pitch, compressed pitch range and a neutral facial expression relative to the preceding and subsequent talk of that speaker. In order to trace what occasions this tease, however, we need to return to consider the trajectory of this self-presentation sequence (Svennevig, 1999).

The excerpt begins with a sequence-initial ‘so’ in line 14. Through this ‘so’-prefacing Jane constitutes her question ‘as having been incipient or “on agenda” when no structural warrant for such a claim is apparent’ (Bolden, 2009: 996), in this case by implicitly connecting it to the terms of the research project. Jane responds to Isaac’s confirmation of his American nationality (line 17) with an ‘oh’ marked with a high rising pitch that treats this as newsworthy (line 18). However, Isaac proceeds to undermine this presumption of newsworthiness by offering an account as to why this is not actually newsworthy (line 19), which is formatted with a tag question that implies Jane should know this already, and thus her prior question in line 14 was inapposite. She responds with a token that marks her understanding confirmation of this as dependent on his account rather than claiming she has independent knowledge of the matter (Gardner, 2007), although this confirmation subsequently turns out to have been ironic. It is this back-and-forth tussle in relation to their respective epistemic statuses (i.e. who knows what) (Heritage, 2012) that perhaps occasions Jane’s subsequent assertion that she is ‘pretending to be American’ (line 24). However, at the same time that Isaac begins a full repeat in line 26 that appears designed to treat Kay’s questioning action as problematic (Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2010), Jane launches a ‘no’-prefaced disavowal that she is ‘just kidding’ (line 28). This ‘no’-prefacing displays Jane’s orientation to her prior claim as non-serious (Schegloff,
of the inference that she was being serious. Jane then perpetuates the ironic frame introduced by Isaac by responding to his ‘compliment’ with thanks, followed by an evidently non-serious question as to whether she sounds American (line 37). The non-seriousness of Jane’s question is evident from Isaac’s affirmative response (lines 38 and 39), which is delivered with ‘smile voice’ indicating it constitutes a laughable (Jefferson, 2004a), followed by further laughter in response from Jane.
(line 40). The participants subsequently move from a non-serious into a serious frame, after a couple of abandoned restarts, when Jane issues a greeting/how are you utterance to which she immediately appends an offer of her own name (lines 40–41), thereby launching an introducing sequence (Pillet-Shore, 2011).

The tease here is delivered in a deadpan manner, with a disavowal of serious intent and laughter from Jane being delayed. Whether this disavowal is designed to pre-empt or, alternatively, repair a ‘misunderstanding’ of her non-serious intent is equivocal given it overlaps with Isaac’s move to launch a repair. However, in spite of this equivocality, it is apparent that Jane can be taken by both participants to be implementing a tease-like taunt that Isaac was not able to pick up on the ‘designed sequential ambiguity’ of her just prior assertion (Haddington, 2011). In this way, it also implements a mild sanction of Isaac’s prior responses as overly earnest (Drew, 1987). Yet despite this mild sanctioning, the teasing nevertheless occasions a moment of interactionally generated affiliation that is evident from both their shared laughter and smiling, and the subsequent jocular quip from Isaac.

In this section we have discussed how teasing sequences in initial encounters invite intimacy through a three-part series of actions: a teasable (some prior talk or conduct on the part of the target) affords or licenses a subsequent tease through which the teaser implements a mocking, critical stance towards the target, which then proffers an opportunity for the parties to affiliate with this mocking, critical stance. Although implementing a mocking, critical stance constitutes a potential impropriety, in being designed as touched off by the prior talk or conduct of the target and construed as non-serious, this ‘improper talk’ thereby constitutes an invitation to intimacy, which is treated as such through subsequent affiliative responses. By offering an opportunity to affiliate with a mocking, critical or detached stance that remains unsaid but tacitly understood by both parties (Clift, 1999), the teaser thereby invites the tease target into greater intimacy.

In the following section, we consider in more detail the ways in which participants modulated their degree of affiliation with the mocking, critical stance implemented through the tease, and the interactional troubles that recurrently arose when the expected affiliative response was not forthcoming, because either the invitation was declined or the ostensibly affiliative response was treated as somehow inadequate.

Responses to invitations to intimacy in teasing sequences

An invitation to intimacy constitutes a bid that may be accepted to varying degrees or declined by the target of the impropriety (Beach and Glenn, 2011; Jefferson et al., 1987). This acceptance or declination is, of course, consequential for the ongoing interactional accomplishment of the relationship between the parties getting acquainted (Haugh, 2011). In this section, we thus turn to examining in more detail responses to teases in these initial interactions.

Approximately three-quarters of the invitations to intimacy implemented through teases were accepted with varying degrees of affiliation by the targets through smiling, laughter (Excerpt 6), agreement tokens and clapping (Excerpt 7), repeats of the tease (Excerpt 8), or escalations of the impropriety (Excerpt 9).
In Excerpt 6, for instance, Natalie teases that the interaction has been good ‘so far’ (line 21), thereby implying it may not go as well later on. Kate enthusiastically accepts the invitation to intimacy implemented by the teasing impropriety through open-mouthed laughter that indicates appreciation of the tease (line 23) (Drew, 1987: 223). By timing her laughter at line 23 to start in overlap with Natalie’s laughter at line 22, Kate accepts Natalie’s invitation to achieve a ‘laughing together’ (Jefferson, 1979):

(6) AGA: NJKR: 0:11

21 N: yes he he he i(hh)t i(hh)s so(hh) fa(hh)r
22 he[he he he ]
23 K: -> [ha HA ha ha.]
24 (0.8)
25 N: £so ↑what do: you: do:£

This contrasts somewhat with the relatively subdued (cf. Pillet-Shore, 2012) interpolated laughter and smiling response of the tease target in Excerpt 3 (line 70), through which he accepts the invitation to intimacy, but modulates his degree of affiliation with the teaser.

Invitations to intimacy were also accepted through strongly affiliating with the teasing impropriety by, for instance, responding with laughter accompanied by agreement tokens or clapping (Excerpt 7, line 529–530; see also Excerpt 1, line 104, and Excerpt 2, line 19), or through a repeat of the tease (Excerpt 8, line 308):

(7) CAAT: AusAus03: 15:57

526 T: you were the best ma:n he could fi(hh)nd |smiles
527 [ha ha ha ha]
528 P: -> [ye(ha)ha ha]
529 -> |leans head back and claps|

(8) CAAT: AmAm04: 7:12

307 E: °you’re a plus one hh ha°=
308 L: -> =I’m ↑just a plus ↓one hh ha=
309 E: =yeah hh

Finally, invitations to intimacy were accepted through escalating the impropriety by responding with laughter and elaborating on the tease (Excerpt 9, line 32; see also Excerpt 2, line 21; and Excerpt 5, lines 30–34), thereby affiliating even more strongly with the teaser:

(9) AGA: NJKR: 0:14

27 K: £what DO: I do:?£ (0.3) #that’s a nice standard
28 opening ques[tion#]
29 N: -> [hh ] he he he=
30 K: =u:mm
31 (0.2)
In less than a quarter of instances, while the recipients accepted the invitation to intimacy through laughter or escalating the impropriety, they nevertheless rejected the content of the tease proper in the ‘po-faced’ manner, originally described by Drew (1987), by which the target ‘sets the record straight’ (p. 230). In Excerpt 10, for instance, the target of the tease initially rejects the tease (line 616), before affiliating with the invitation to intimacy through laughter (line 618).

(10) AGA: ERCH: 15:30

612 C: ↓*does he do bonsai as well?* (*deadpan*)
613 (0.3)
614 C: .hh
615 (.)
616 E: -> NO::: NOT LIKE [THA(H)T
617 C:                [ha ha
618 E: -> AH ha ha ha ha ha .hhh nup

In one instance, the target’s laughing rejection of the tease was treated as inadequate by the teaser. In the following excerpt, an American engineer David has been telling Kerry, a retired Australian, about having to deal with the volatility of oil prices in his job.

(11) CAAT: AmAus30: 18:04

282 D: we are: uh: (0.8) yea:::h (.).hh w:::- we’re in a
283 very cy:clic business? (.).hh a:nd yea:h
284 [the oi:l — ]
285 K: [>it’ll come up<] again.
286 (0.2)
287 D: .hh it’ll come up again? uh: but u:m (0.6) "uh: you
288 know that’s that’s the nature of" [the:]
289 K: [long] as you:r:
290 salary isn’t dependable on the hhe (.).hhe the
291 pri(hh)ce [haha] hh $per litre=
292 D: [no:::]
293 K: =you’re al[fri:right]
294 D: [oh yea:h it’s [not
295 K: [heh [ha ha ha .hh
296 D: [ha ha it’s not=
297 K: =.hh
298 D: uh:[:]
299 K: [it’s a $good [thing]
300 D: [no no ] uh: so uh: .hh (.).u:m
301 (0.4) actually u:m—(0.7) i- it’s pretty much
302 independent of that so uh: .hh uh[: ]
303 K: -> [again] I’m being
304 face:tiou[s you [see: ]
305 D: = [ah: ] hahahaha[haha .hh
306 K: [hmhmhm .hh=
Kerry teases David that he is lucky his salary is not pegged to changing oil prices (lines 289–291). David responds to the tease with laughter, thereby ostensibly accepting Kerry’s invitation to intimacy, although this laughter is delayed until line 296 following an initially po-faced response (lines 292, 294). However, his response is subsequently treated as inadequate when Kerry disavows any serious intent in claiming that she was ‘being facetious’ (lines 303–304). This occasions ‘oh’-prefaced laughter from David in line 305 through which he indicates that her claimed non-seriousness in making this suggestion is new information for him (Heritage, 1984), with which Kerry joins in (line 306). In this way, through subsequently initiating a repair, Kerry actively pursues (Pomerantz, 1984b) acceptance of the invitation to intimacy that was launched through her initial tease in lines 289 to 291.

The remaining quarter of responses to teases in initial interactions involved the tease target declining or disattending the invitation to intimacy. In such cases the tease either remained embedded (Jefferson, 1987), as there was no moment of joint affiliation displayed through mutual ratification of the tease as non-serious, or alternatively, occasioned repair that was initiated by the teaser. In the following excerpt, George and Bob have been talking about a string of losses by a particular rugby league team they both follow in New South Wales, Australia:

(12) ICE-AUS: S1A-001: 12:11

319 B: well- I <don’t know what (. ) what went wrong> but
320   *(ooh the-)*
321 G: *that might be*
322 B: >but < a blo:ody lot (. ) lot that did go wrong?
323 G: °they might be camera shy* °((deadpan))°
324 (0.2)
325 G: oh no:. >ha ha< [ha
326 B: °:h shi:t they’ve had enough=
327 G: *[T:V: games this year] to snap out of that sort of=
328 G: *[ye:ah (mate) I kno:w]*
329 G: -> °I’m only jo:kin.°
330 ((conversation lapses for 12 seconds))
331 B: >I tell you what< Mainly went up a <few knots>
332 didn’t they la:st wee:k?

The tease in question arises in line 323 when George offers an account for the team’s poor performance, that is, that since the game was televised it somehow unnerved them (being in the days when state rugby games had only just started to be televised live). The tease is designed as responsive to Bob’s ongoing complaints about the team, and so sanctions him for overdoing these complaints (Drew, 1987). Yet while the tease is delivered with a deadpan prosodic contour, following a lack of an immediate response from Bob, George rejects that account himself (line 325), thereby construing it as non-serious (Schegloff, 2001), followed by turn-final laughter that invites laughter from Bob (Jefferson, 1979). Bob, however, seriously rejects George’s non-serious account (lines 326–327). George then goes on to claim in overlapping speech (line 328) that he did not
really think the camera had an effect on the team’s performance, and disavows having had any serious intent (line 329). The conversation between them then lapses for a significant period (12 seconds) before Bob restarts his conversation with George through a stepwise topic transition (Jefferson, 1984). In this case, then, not only was the invitation to intimacy declined, the serious rejection of the tease occasions interactional trouble that results in repair and a subsequent period during which the conversation lapses. There is evidence, then, that declining an invitation to intimacy through serious rejection of a tease can occasion interactional troubles in initial interactions among (American and Australian) speakers of English.

**Conclusion**

Teasing is an action typically associated with intimates and close friends. In this article, however, we have examined the role of teasing in initial interactions between persons who are getting acquainted. This article has demonstrated that teasing does indeed occur between people who are not yet well acquainted. We then examined the sequential design of these teases and how this underpins the way in which teasing in initial encounters is recurrently accomplished as inviting intimacy. It emerged from this analysis that tease sequences in such interactions typically unfold in a three-part series: a teasable action on the part of the target that triggers the tease, the tease proper, followed by a moment of interactionally generated affiliation. We proposed that teasing in initial interactions invites intimacy, because although a tease is a vehicle for other criticism that is face-threatening, and so constitutes a potential impropriety in the context of an initial interaction, the introduction of an impropriety may also propose a move into more intimate interaction. This is because it proffers an opportunity for the participants to (momentarily) affiliate with the mocking, critical stance implemented through the tease, which is afforded, in turn, by some prior talk or conduct on the part of the target (i.e. the teasable).

We then examined the responses of targets to instances of teasing in initial interactions. Targets largely affiliated with teasers through laughter, agreement and elaborations of the tease, although in some cases rejected the content of the tease itself. In cases where the tease target did not accept the invitation to intimacy proffered by the tease, repair sequences were recurrently occasioned. This analysis suggests that affiliating with this invitation to intimacy was treated as expected by those participants, in particular by the teaser. However, while accepting the invitations to intimacy proffered through these teasing sequences was evidently treated as expected by these participants, it remains open to further research whether such a finding can be extended to initial encounters in other settings, such as the workplace, and, of course, across other languages and cultures.

Finally, while a full analysis of the structural position of these teasing sequences within these initial encounters lies outside the scope of this article, we did observe a tendency for them to be preceded by moments of interactional ‘discomfort’ or ‘disfluency’ or with the tease target ‘overdoing’ some action, and for them to be followed by sequences in which progressivity was restored. It appears, then, that the role that the broader interactional activity in which the teasing is situated – in this case getting acquainted – plays in the accomplishment of teasing as an invitation to intimacy is deserving of further study.
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Notes
1. Social psychologists make a distinction between ‘prosocial’ and ‘antisocial’ forms of teasing drawing evidence primarily from questionnaires and experimental studies (Keltner et al., 2001). Most interactional studies of teasing have focused on the former, given the restriction to instances of mocking jibes or taunts that are (ostensibly) playful or jocular (Drew, 1987). However, whether a clear-cut distinction can be maintained between the two types of teasing proposed by social psychologists in actual situated contexts remains to be seen (see Haugh, 2017 for further discussion).
2. Margutti (2007) studied instances of teasing among family members in front of unacquainted guests, but in this study the newcomers themselves were not the target of teasing.
3. These proportions reflect those of the larger data set from which they are sourced. Of these interactions 18 were taken from the Corpus of Americans and Australians Talking (CAAT) (Haugh and Carbaugh, 2015), eight interactions were taken from the Australians Getting Acquainted corpus (AGA) (Haugh, 2011), three interactions were taken from the University of Texas Conversation Library (UTCL) and one further initial interaction was sourced from the Australian component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-AUS).
4. Most of the participants were broadly middle-class, university-educated professionals or university students from a broadly Anglo-European background. However, the aim of the project was not to collect a ‘representative’ sample of American or Australian speakers of English per se, and the findings here are not intended to be generalisable to the whole population of American or Australian speakers of English.
5. The only exception to this was that in the case of the UTCL initial interactions, participants were given a list of topics to refer to if they ran out of things to say.
6. These involved audio recordings in the case of excerpts from AGA, ICE-AUS and UTCL, and audiovisual recordings in the case of excerpts from CAAT.
7. Out of the 34 teasing sequences identified, 17 were produced across 13 AusAus interactions, 9 were produced across 6 AmAm interactions, and 8 were produced across the 5 AmAus interactions (with 7 out of the latter 8 being initiated by the American participant). Of the 20 teases produced by female participants, 11 were directed at other women and 9 were directed at men, while of the 14 teases produced by male participants, 10 were directed at women and 4 were directed at men. These proportions broadly coincide with the proportions of same-gender (8 F-F; 6 M-M) and different gender pairings (16 F-M) in the data set.
8. The time stamp indicates the point at which the excerpt begins with respect to the start of that initial encounter’s recording.
9. Out of the 34 teasing sequences we analysed, 20 (59%) involved affiliative acceptances of the teases, 6 (17.5%) involved affiliative rejections, and 8 (23.5%) involved non-affiliative or disaffiliative responses.
10. What inferences might be licensed by this lack of response remains indeterminate, given this interaction was collected in the early 1990s and only audio recorded.

References


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