

The Varieties of Flirtatious Experience

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In Jenkins's groundbreaking analysis of flirtation (Jenkins 2006), she suggests that an act is an act of flirtation if, and only if, the following two conditions are satisfied: "First, the flirter should act with the intention to raise flirter/flirtee romance and/or sex to salience, in a knowing yet playful way. Second, he or she should believe that the flirtee can respond in some significant way". Jenkins also draws the useful distinction between flirtation proper and "flirtatious behaviour": there is behaviour that typically raises romance or sex to salience in a knowing but playful way, but it can occur without flirting. In Jenkins's example, a woman touching her ear while chatting to a man in Italy, who has no knowledge that in Italy that can be a sexual come-on, may be behaving flirtatiously without flirting. On the other hand, there can be flirting that does not count as flirtatious behaviour. There can be one-off jokes or private codes that intentionally and playfully raise sex or romance to salience, but through behaviour that seems entirely innocuous (or perhaps just strange) to anyone besides the flirter and flirtee.

Notice that on Jenkins' definition, whether or not an act of flirtation occurs depends almost exclusively on the internal states of the supposed flirter. Provided the flirter acts with a certain intention, it does not matter whether the act does produce any impact on the flirtee, or even if there is a flirtee, provided the flirter *believes* there is one who can respond in some significant way. I am inclined to think that flirting depends also, in some ways, on the flirter's environment: on facts about the flirtee, and facts about conventional expectations. Flirting is a social activity. I think Jenkins has come closer to defining what it takes for there to be an *attempted* flirt. Luckily for all concerned, many attempted flirtations are successful.

In this paper I want to first make some methodological remarks, then discuss three challenges Jenkins's analysis faces: problems of "serious" behaviour, failed flirts, and accidental flirtation.

Method

Questions of meaning in shared, natural languages like English are messy. With a word like "flirt", there are a wide range of speakers who came to learn the word in different ways, tend to use it for slightly different purposes, and are likely to infer slightly different things when they are told flirting is going on. Somehow, out of all these individual understandings and dispositions to use the word, the word comes to have a common meaning. That meaning, of course, need not be entirely precise, and is likely to be some extent indeterminate where different people understand it with slight divergences over uncommon cases. That observation does not show that there is nothing to be said about the meaning - nobody who knows what "flirt" means could confuse it with the meaning of "rhinoceros" - but it may mean that there is a certain amount unsettled about what counts. That said, perhaps some of my disagreements with Jenkins will turn out to be in the penumbra where the meaning is not settled. If they are, they will still serve as useful

corrections to Jenkins's account, since it is a mistake to count an act as a flirt when it is indeterminate whether it counts or not.

Why try to work out what flirting is through considering cases and coming up with generalisations that seem plausible and handle the cases correctly, rather than, for example, hand out questionnaires about what counts as flirting, or doing sociological research by studying many cases of flirting across our society or language group? There is the expense, of course - wear and tear on an armchair is not much compared to the cost of a lot of social science research. But there are methodological reasons to think this reflective method is valuable in its own right. One is that asking people to say off the top of their heads how they would characterise flirting will only reveal their theory (perhaps a quick off-the-cuff theory) of flirting, not necessarily what it is they are in fact picking up and responding to. How do they articulate that theory? Presumably by something like the method philosophers do, but without the benefit of first thinking about the range of cases, or having much previous experience in trying to get these definitions right. Consider, then, the alternative of doing a lot of observations of flirting and then trying to form generalisations about them. There's the difficulty that we won't know what to include as data in the survey and what not until we have some idea of which actions are the flirts and which do not. Of course we can refine our picture of flirting once we have the general idea by observing what people do, but there still seems a place for reflective consideration.

We need not pick one sort of investigation once and for all - if anyone wanted to pour money into flirting studies, I am sure things could be learned by surveys and observation, and perhaps even experiment. (I think I know some people who would volunteer for flirting experiments.)

Then there is the question of why care about flirting at all (in a theoretical way, anyway - those who can't see why to care about it in a practical way will have to sort that out by themselves). Not everyone will, and that's fine. Some of us are more curious or theoretically minded, and we enjoy trying to work out what flirting is and what interesting questions there are about flirting. There's nothing wrong with trying to make explicit understandings that we have implicitly, to step back and look at our language and social practices. As well as its intrinsic interest to some of us, and the opportunities to flirt through meta-flirting (opportunities probably only of interest to philosophers), I think it is also an interesting test case. Philosophers are interested in a lot of more deep-sounding questions about actions, social relationships, and even more generally the meanings of expressions, but partly because they are deep, they are especially thorny. Even if we did have a method worked out, I am sure that work on evil or existence or voluntary action would still have its challenges. Given that we want a toolkit to help us with difficult and more profound cases, it can be worthwhile to try the method out on apparently more tractable questions, and see what happens. Cases that appear to raise fewer larger issues are also ones where it might be possible to be level-headed about thinking about what the method is and what it is doing for us - nobody (yet) will have their career in ruins, or their other projects in great immanent danger, if it turns out their approach to the philosophy of flirting is misguided.

So much for an indication of what I think I'm doing, and why I think I am doing it. And the first explicit defence of meta-flirting I have seen written up. No doubt that will lead off my obituary. Now to cases that seem to cause trouble for Jenkins's account of flirting.

Failures

In flirting, as in life, good intentions are not everything, or so it seems. Sometimes an action can be intended to raise romance or sex to salience, but be so badly unsuited to that end that it fails to count as a flirt at all, or so it seems to me. Billy starts cooing down the phone to Jane just after, unbenownst to him, he is cut off. He may whisper sweet nothings into the phone for a while, in a way that would be a clear case of flirtation if Jane was on the other end to hear, and he might have all the right intentions, but I don't think he managed to flirt. Of course he *attempted* to, and he behaved flirtatiously, but it failed to connect so badly it was not a flirt.

Or consider another case, this time from real life. A young man once sent a young woman he fancied a jewellery box containing decaying kangaroo testicles. I am not sure the subsequent court case records why he did this, but suppose he intended to playfully and knowingly raise sexual activity to salience. Even in Australia, that sort of thing is not likely to work. I am not denying that there could be some couple, somewhere, in principle, between which the exchange of bloodied kangaroo scrotums would count as flirting - though I am not sure I would want to meet them socially. But it seems to me that when an attempt to raise sex or romance to salience is especially badly suited to that, given the culture and given the expectations of the parties, etc. etc., then there is only attempted flirting, there is not flirting. In fact, if we imagine a fairly standard lack of specific cues or pre-staging, typical sensibilities on the part of the young woman, and so on, we might think that attempt to flirt not just failed to be a particularly good flirt, but failed to count as a flirt at all. Consider if you, dear reader, started to receive kangaroo testicles in the mail from a man you knew socially. Would your reaction be "is he flirting with me?"?

Cases of attempts that do not result in flirtation like both of the above can be multiplied. More controversially, attempting to flirt with the wrong sort of flirtee might not count. If Joe tries to flirt with a cow, even if he thinks the cow is playfully encouraging him, I am not sure I want to say it is genuine flirtation. I am reluctant to call it flirtation when a paedophile tries to knowingly and playfully suggest things to a six-year-old, even if he honestly believes that it might produce the right sort of response. Singing out suggestively to what looked like a young woman at the window but was only a billowing curtain is not only embarrassing, it is not flirtation.

Jenkins can try to respond that these are cases of flirtation, but just that they are poor-quality flirtation. "Unsuccessful flirtation" is ambiguous - it could refer to flirtation that does not achieve some goal - paradigm cases of flirtation can result in a brush-off - or it could refer to the production of very low-quality flirting when something better was

aimed at, I suppose, or it could be used to mean an attempt to flirt that did not result in flirtation at all. It is consistent with Jenkins's view that sweet nothings down a cut-off telephone line, or grotesque behaviour that only revolts, or trying to joke with what turns out to be a curtain, are unsuccessful flirtations only in the first two senses.

Of course this makes things trickier, but I do not think in the end that response works. There certainly are actions we want to count as acts of flirting that do not result in romantic success for the flirter, and we can happily allow that some acts of flirtation are better, as acts of flirtation, than others. But eyeing a young man who is not interested, or trying to joke salaciously and coming across as drunk and boorish, seem to me very different from the sorts of failures I think stop an act being flirtation altogether. Billy does not flirt with Jane, due to the phone being cut off. It is not merely that he flirts badly, or does not get what he wants out of his murmuring (though presumably this second thing is true too). As for cases where the attempt is so bad it is not the successful action at all, consider the analogy with verbal abuse. Whether what you say is abuse may depend in part on what the intention was. But some attempts to abuse people might be so lame that they are not even abusive. "You drive a green car!", without some set-up or awareness of what might be behind the remark, might not count as abuse at all, even if the speaker was trying to say something to hurt and embarrass the addressee. Of course abuse can be better or worse, and somebody can count as abusing someone else even if they say things that the addressee does not in fact find hurtful. But accusations that are sufficiently badly suited to hurt, or embarrass, or whatever good abuse does, may fail to be abusive altogether even if they were intended to be. Perhaps flirtation is like abusing people in this respect: an action too badly suited fails to be one of the kind at all.

Serious Contexts

Another, quite different issue with Jenkins's definition is whether it includes too much by including playful raisings-to-salience that go beyond flirting. Very sexual things, and presumably very romantic things, can be done in a playful spirit, but I don't think we count them as flirtatious. "Flirtation" has *something* unserious about it (though the unseriousness can of course go along with far-from-unserious ulterior motives), but I am not sure that "playfulness" captures it.

Penetrative sexual intercourse can happen playfully, and it is even more obvious that a lot of foreplay can be carried out with a playful air or in a playful way. I take it that people having sex often want to knowingly raise that to salience with their partner, and often take their partner to be in position to respond. Nevertheless I do not think people would count sex as flirting, and while flirting can of course be part of foreplay, I doubt that every piece of playful foreplay would count, even when the intention to make sex salient is part of the proceedings.

If "playfulness" does not capture the right sort of unseriousness, it is difficult to know exactly how to characterise it, even if we can intuitively see that some activity (like sex or advanced foreplay) is not "unserious" in the right way. Maybe we have no independent expression for the right sort of unseriousness - perhaps our understanding of

it comes only through our grasp of flirting. Or perhaps I have just not managed to articulate the alternative to playfulness we need.

There is another worry concerning seriousness at the other end of the spectrum. Jenkins requires that the intention be to raise sex or romance to salience. Need flirting always have such weighty ends in sight? If a woman intends to bring to her target's notice in a playful way that she is good-looking, or an eligible man intend that his object find him charming, might that be enough, in some circumstances, to supply the needed intention? Of course, the intentions one has, on the one hand, and the intentions one would readily admit to in polite company, on the other, may well be different. But if we count as flirting some playful interaction not yet intended to bring about thoughts of sex or romance, then we need some more generous characterisation of the relevant intentions. Again, I have no specific one to offer, and I would not be at all suprised if it is a bit indeterminate how mild the intention can be and still count as enough for flirtation.

Accidents

On Jenkins's account, it seems like accidental flirting is impossible. If you did not mean it, then even if what you did was very flirtatious, and it was foreseeable and obvious it would be taken as flirtation by the recipient, it is not flirting. Of course we would want to avoid the other extreme - not every bit of playfulness that is construed as a flirt is really a flirt - flirtees, or jealous third parties, can see things that aren't there. But is it plausible that not matter how suggestive, and no matter how friendly and conventionally flirtatious an action is, one can never accidentally come to count as flirting?

Some "unintended" flirting is possible even on Jenkins's account. One can start an interaction with a firm intention to keep it unflirty and then slip or get carried away into intentionally flirting. One can even presumably be self-deceived - one can realise only afterwards that one was trying to interest an object of desire in possible romance or sex. (Oops!) Or of course one can direct an act at the wrong person - if Jane walks up to Bob and whispers something suggestive in his ear because she thinks it is Billy, then in some sense her flirting with Bob was unintended. But I think that accidental flirting may be possible in more cases than these. Sexual desire, in particular, does not just manifest through intentional actions, and it might help predict and explain playful, friendly actions that the flirter knows may raise romance or sex to salience, even if a flirter is trying to flirt with a tempting target, or isn't really thinking about what they intend by their actions at all. I have to admit I am not sure about this, partly because the question of when someone has an unavowed, and maybe unconscious, intention is a very hard question to adjudicate. Maybe we are awash with fleeting intentions to make sex or romance salient. (Some people surely are.) And Jenkins could also claim that there is a lot of flirtatious behaviour without flirting, if people are giving off clear signals without an intention to do so. But at least sometimes I think that people can flirt without intending to - they may realise only in hindsight, or only further along their acquaintance, that flirting was occurring earlier without any intention to do so. And if this is right, then while flirting cannot be entirely automatic, perhaps it depends on more factors than intention.

A New Analysis?

It is easier to worry about difficult cases than come up with a simple account that gets the cases right. Those who believe that the boundaries are messy and indeterminate have even a harder time stating an analysis, since a sharp line does not leave questions like whether a case is just barely a case of flirting or just barely indeterminate, for example.

So here is a specific proposal that is closer to what I would suggest, though it is still not messy enough, I am afraid. An act is an act of flirtation if, and only if

- 1) the flirter acts in a way that s/he is aware or should be aware is to bring sex, or romance, or some similar positive interaction to salience in a flirtee, and
- 2) that act is not in fact excessively badly suited to the purpose of bringing to salience, given the circumstances, and
- 3) the act is suitably unserious (though we may not be able to give a terribly good independent specification of “unserious”).

This definition may not be of much use to introduce the fine points of flirting to someone, since they may not have an independent grip on “suitable unseriousness” or the sort of “similarity” of what is brought to salience, or what sorts of failures of salience-raising prevent flirting as opposed to just making it less than ideal. But since that probably isn’t how we learn what flirting is anyway, the fact that we cannot easily expand this definition into a field-test for flirting should not worry us too much. More investigations in the field may still prove useful, then.¹

Daniel Nolan
Department of Philosophy
The University of Nottingham
University Park, Nottingham
NG7 2RD
United Kingdom
danieln@coombs.anu.edu.au

References

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