

Original Paper

Laughter in Interpersonal Communication: When Laughter Conveys Disaffiliation

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Abstract

Laughter serves primarily as a social instrument, functioning as a social facilitator commonly observed in interpersonal interactions, and playing a crucial role in fostering and maintaining relationships. Affiliation and disaffiliation are interactive phenomena that are externally and measurably manifested, serving as pivotal components in the establishment of social bonds. Affiliation entails the overt demonstration of endorsement and concordance among interacting individuals, whereas disaffiliation within social relationships typically materializes through assessments, leading to disagreements and side-arguments. Laughter, when serving as a tool for strengthening social bonds between individuals, it not only signals affiliation but also disaffiliation among conversational partners. Through the method of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics, this article will specifically analyze the role of laughter as a means of conveying disaffiliation. Focusing on analyzing three specific functions of laughter to show disaffiliation, which encompass self-image preservation, face-saving, and transitioning from an embarrassing to a non-embarrassing context, the thesis will present three prototypical dialogues originating from diverse backgrounds as exemplars to elucidate the three functions.

Keywords

laughter, affiliation and disaffiliation, interpersonal communication, interactional linguistics

1. Introduction

Laughter is universally presented in interpersonal communication and plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining relationships. It helps to create a positive atmosphere, convey humor, and enhance emotional connections (Chen, 2016). Affiliation entails the public display of support and agreement between interacting parties, which is vital for sustaining social relationships. Laughter, as a social tool, can sometimes convey affiliation when people having conversations. However, laughter in dialogue not only reflects friendly attitudes and a sense of belonging in interpersonal interactions, but there exists the

possibility when people try to express their disaffiliation with a topic through laughter as well. In light of the above circumstance, this article will specifically analyze the role of laughter as a means of conveying disaffiliation through conversation analysis and the perspective of interactional linguistics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Philosophical View

In history, philosophers have used laughter to comment on different types of humor and to theoretically analyze the motives of humans using humor. The three main historical theories of laughter are superiority, incongruity, and relief. Each theory provides a different view of the purpose of laughter. The first is called the superiority theory, which suggests that laughter is a means of competition between people and an expression of superiority. Laughter is considered an effective means of correcting or controlling unacceptable behavior. Thomas Hobbes formulated the superiority principle, viewing laughter as a result of winning in a perpetual struggle. Albert Rap expanded the superiority principle to include laughter towards loved ones and oneself. Some philosophers consider the superiority theory as a long-standing approach to understanding laughter (Hayakawa, 2003). The second is called the incongruity theory, which suggests that laughter arises from unexpected and absurd events. Both Kant and Schopenhauer believed that laughter originates from incongruity, but for different reasons. Incongruity plays a significant role in provoking laughter, which is often due to a sudden departure from the norm. Laughter resulting from incongruity depends on the emotions arising from unexpected situations (Malphurs, 2010). The third one is called relief theory, which suggests that laughter arises from the expression and release of emotions caused by stress. Freud modified the relief theory, considering laughter as a shift from releasing physical energy to excessive mental energy (Malphurs, 2010).

2.2 Sociological View

Many scholars nowadays have explored the social functions of laughter, considering it to have existed prior to both humor and speech in humans (Provine, 2000). It is not only a psychological and biological phenomenon, but also fundamentally a social one. Coordinated with speech and other interactive activities, laughter is used by participants to manage social relationships and identities (Glenn, 2003). Laughter, as a social tool, can be regarded as a social lubricant. A study found out that laughter can increase social bonding and cooperation between strangers, leading to enhanced positive affect and reduced negative affect (Van Vugt et al., 2018).

2.2.1 Affiliation and Disaffiliation

Affiliation and disaffiliation are interactive phenomena that are externally and measurably produced, playing key roles in building social relationships. Affiliation involves the public display of support and agreement between interacting parties which have shared normative principles, i.e., social esteem and social sanction (Wang & Jiang, 2024). It could be produced through various means such as topic organization, collaborative storytelling, preference structures for agreement, and intimacy pursuits. Disaffiliation in social relationships tends to occur in the form of assessments, leading to disagreements

and side-arguments. While it may lead to arguments on the one hand, on the other hand, it can also positively shift a conversation towards more direct and honest communication (Conroy, 1999).

2.2.2 Laughter in Conveying Affiliation

From an acoustic perspective, laughter can convey affiliation through properties like pitch, voicing, and formants, signaling friendliness and non-threatening intentions. Affiliative laughter serves to maintain relationships and indicate benign intentions, distinct from spontaneous and rewarding laughter (Wood, 2017). In another perspective, laughter can express a sense of connection by demonstrating empathy and aligning with the preference of the preceding action. When laughter is responsive in interactions, it can indicate a bond with the person who elicited the laughter. Affiliative reactions entail mirroring the speaker's viewpoint and aligning with their level of emotional cooperation, which make laughter effective in strengthening social relationships through communication (Clift, 2016).

2.2.3 Laughter in Conveying Disaffiliation

However, on the other hand, laughter can also be used to convey disaffiliation. Laughter can convey disaffiliation by targeting a prior turn as laughable, showing a negative stance towards it. Disaffiliative laughter may come from a party other than the recipient of the laughable turn, indicating a complex interplay of affiliation and disaffiliation. In interactions, disaffiliative laughter can be used by one speaker to affiliate with another against a third party (Clift, 2016).

Inevitably, people may possibly encounter some difficult interactional situations when one intends to express disaffiliation, and laughter and humour can be served as effective ways to manage the awkward circumstances. However, the ways that laughter and humour handle disaffiliation are quite different. Humor directly addresses the content of the disagreement by making comments that reframe the seriousness of the topic. It involves using wit, irony, or satire to bring attention to the disagreement while lightening the mood. In contrast, laughter does not engage directly with the content of the disagreement itself. Instead, it focuses on transforming the overall atmosphere or framing of the situation. Laughter serves as a mechanism to shift the perspective of the participants involved in the disagreement. It allows them to view the escalating tension as something amusing or less serious, thereby diffusing the conflict. Laughter acts as a safety valve in conversations where disagreements are escalating. It provides a release of tension and allows participants to step back from the seriousness of the disagreement, creating a moment of levity. Through laughter, participants can reframe the disagreement as something laughable rather than contentious, offering a way to navigate the conflict without directly addressing the contentious issues (Warner-Garcia, 2014).

Building on the points above, this thesis will further elaborate on the function of laughter as a distinct and succinct method of expressing disaffiliation in everyday conversations, and provide a relevant classification and summary.

3. Methodological Approaches

The methodological approaches used in the present study are informed by conversation analysis and interactional linguistics.

3.1 Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is a methodological approach used for studying naturally occurring spoken data. Different from other theories, CA focuses more on the analysis of communication closely related to daily life (Wang & Sun, 2023). It involves analyzing the structures, patterns, and processes of various social interactions, including everyday verbal and non-verbal practices (Elizabeth, 2020).

Using the method of conversation analysis to explore the role of laughter in interpersonal communication can help to reveal the role of laughter in communication and situation regulation, as well as the application of laughter in communication transformation, proximity and storytelling. This approach can also help to understand the structure, patterns, and processes of laughter in different social interactions, as well as the function of laughter in everyday verbal and non-verbal practices.

3.2 Interactional Linguistics

Interactional linguistics refers to the study of language use in social interaction, focusing on how language is used to create and maintain social relationships. It examines the structure and organization of conversational interaction, as well as the role of language in shaping social actions and relationships. This field often draws on methods from conversation analysis and discourse analysis to analyze spoken and written language in its social context. Interactional linguistics focuses on language structure and use in social interactions. Laughter is studied in interactional linguistics to understand its pragmatic or interpersonal functions in talk-in-interaction, which can be used to show appreciation, invite others to join in, or show disaffiliation in conversations (Chen, 2016).

4. Data Analysis

The upcoming analysis will examine the three specific functions of laughter to show disaffiliation. These functions encompass (1) self-image preservation, (2) face-saving, and (3) transitioning from an embarrassing to a non-embarrassing context. Self-image preservation involves mitigating an ongoing threat to one's image during the interaction, while face-saving entails concealing a loss of face that has already transpired. Transitioning from an embarrassing to a non-embarrassing frame involves reinterpreting a potentially face-threatening action as humorous and benign.

The following three examples illustrate the transcription produced by applying a conversational analysis transcription system to the previously collected audio recordings. This transcription system includes various symbols, such as "><" indicating a sudden increase in the speaker's speech rate; "<>" indicating a sudden decrease in the speaker's speech rate; ":" indicating an elongation of the speaker's intonation, with the number of colons corresponding to the duration of the elongation; "(0.2)" representing the length of pauses during the conversation in seconds; "=" denoting a continuous sentence without pauses or a lack of obvious pauses between turns; and "@" representing laughter.

4.1 Self-image Preservation

Example 1 demonstrates how the individual might utilize laughter to reduce threat to one's self-image and change the perspective of the situation. This scenario involves two female roommates (Felicia and Harper) chatting in their dorm room. Felicia talks about a new lipstick shade she bought and describes her indecision in choosing the shade. She expresses extreme fondness for the lipstick and seeks a positive response from Harper, but Harper's reaction is not enthusiastic.

Example 1.

- 1 **F:** Wow: :look at this lipstick of mine(0.2) >so pretty<
- 2 (0.2)
- 3 **H:** What shade is it?
- 4 **F:** (0.3)Let me check
- 5 **H:** =Mm-hmm
- 6 (0.8)
- 7 **F:** It's "intoyou":in shade EM20
- 8 **(0.6)**
- 9 **H:** Not bad
- 10 **F:** Rea:lly:>you have no idea<how long it took me:to choose:
- 11 **H:** Mm-hmm
- 12 **F:** I looked at reviews on Facebook and Bilibili for a long time:
- 13 **(0.3)**
- 14 →**H:** Mm::@@it does look pre:tty good

Throughout the conversation, Felicia expresses great satisfaction with her lipstick choice, detailing the difficulty and indecision involved in the selection process. However, Harper's response is rather perfunctory, indicating that she may not actually find the lipstick shade appealing. Harper later uses laughter to ease the slightly awkward situation, possibly to maintain a sincere image in front of her roommate.

4.2 Face-saving

Example 2 demonstrates how individuals use laughter to mask a loss of face in a given situation. This scenario involves a casual conversation between two newly acquainted female friends, Flora and Angela, during a meal. Flora mentions a recently discovered delicious milk tea that she is eager to try, but Angela, who does not usually drink milk tea and is unfamiliar with the brand, creates an awkward moment between them.

Example 2

- 1 **F:** Hey! Do you know that a new bubble tea shop called "LELECHA" has opened in the mall?
- 2 (0.8)
- 3 **A:** What?

- 4 F: LE:LE: CHA:: >You don't know about it<
 5 →A: @@Never heard of it, I usually don't pay attention to these things
 6 (0.5)
 7 F: You are so health-conscious! It's just a milk tea shop.
 8 A: >Oh I see< I see:: @@Let's go check it out later.

Throughout the conversation, Flora expresses her desire to try "LELECHA" milk tea, but Angela's lack of knowledge about milk tea creates a sense of unfamiliarity. It is important to note that Flora and Angela are newly acquainted friends, knowing very little about each other and aiming to make a good impression. Milk tea is a popular topic among young people, and Angela's limited knowledge about it is quite uncommon. In front of a new friend, this can be seen as a loss of face, and Angela uses laughter later in the conversation to alleviate the brief awkwardness between them, a way of concealing her temporary loss of face.

4.3 Transitioning from an Embarrassing to a Non-embarrassing Context

Example 3 demonstrates how people use laughter to transform a rather serious and awkward situation into a less embarrassing one in specific circumstances. This scenario involves a couple, Magic and Flora, taking photos of each other while walking in the park. Flora sees a beautiful spot and asks Magic to take a picture for her. However, due to Magic's limited photography skills, he fails to capture a satisfactory photo, leading to Flora's dissatisfaction and a serious argument. To ease the tense atmosphere, Magic uses laughter to console Flora.

Example 3

- 1 F: Let me see how you took the photos.
 2 M: Well, how does it look?
 3 F: It's not right! How could you make me look so ::ug:ly like this?
 4 M: I think it looks pretty good, doesn't it?
 5 F: What's good about it? Look at how you made me look like I weigh 150 pounds.
 6 →M: @@It's okay, sweetheart. Let me take a few more for you, okay?
 7 (0.4)
 8 M: @@Please, pretty please.
 9 F: I can't believe you (0.3) I'll give you one more chance! <The last one>

This conversation takes place between a very close couple, and due to Magic's limited photography skills, it leads to some conflict between the two. When Flora expresses her dissatisfaction with the photos, it creates a serious and awkward situation, potentially leading to an argument. However, Magic uses laughter to indicate his disaffiliation with the situation, attempting to make the serious scene less intense. Later, Flora agreeing to give him another chance to take photos reflects the success of his approach---to switch from an embarrassing to a non-embarrassing situation.

5. Results

The above three dialogic excerpts serve as typical examples of three different ways in which laughter is used as a means of expressing disaffiliation, drawn from everyday conversations and analyzed through the research methods of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics. In dialogues, despite the speakers' intention to convey their dissent towards a specific event or object, the incorporation of laughter serves to not only ameliorate the overall conversational ambiance but also functions as a social lubricant, strengthening the pre-existing social bonds among the interlocutors. The utilization of laughter in such contexts not only softens the expression of disagreement but also fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding, contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of interpersonal relationships. The use of laughter in these dialogues exemplifies its role in (1) self-image preservation, (2) face-saving, (3) transitioning from an embarrassing to a non-embarrassing context of the speakers. In the first dialogue, the speaker aimed to uphold a genuine image in front of her friend. Although she disagreed with her friend, she still used laughter to demonstrate support for her friend's perspective, showcasing her response to the threat of her own image being compromised. The second dialogue unfolded within the interaction of two recently acquainted strangers. To create a positive impression, one of the conversational participants employed laughter as a means to alleviate the embarrassment stemming from her lack of familiarity with the milk tea brand mentioned by the new acquaintance. In this scenario, laughter functioned as a tool to preserve the speaker's dignity and thus try to conceal the loss of face. Moving to the third dialogue involving a romantic couple, the male partner utilized laughter to navigate the embarrassment arising from his inability to capture flattering photographs of his girlfriend, effectively transforming the embarrassing situation between them into a non-embarrassing one.

6. Discussion

Laughter is primarily a social tool, which can be served as a social lubricant and is commonly found in interpersonal communication and plays a vital role in the creation and upkeep of relationships. It can indicate not only affiliation but also disaffiliation between the speakers, with the common goal of reinforcing the social connection between individuals. The above analysis illustrates the functions laughter have to express disaffiliation while try to keep the maintenance of social relationships. The three functions of laughter for indicating disaffiliation the thesis has mentioned include self-image preservation, face-saving and transition from embarrassing to non-embarrassing situations. The analysis of the dialogues and the results shows that when an individual needs to express disagreement with another's views due to differences in values, lifestyles, aesthetics, etc., while still maintaining a certain social image and relationship, laughter can serve as a tool to facilitate the progression of the entire process. In this context, laughter can be viewed as a strategy employed to compensate the emotions of others when they do not receive the anticipated level of affiliation, and thus achieve the goal of maintaining social relationships while expressing one's own views. The research discussed in the article sheds light on the importance of further exploring the role of laughter in interpersonal communication. Despite the limited

number of studies, the article does not exhaustively outline the various functions of laughter in conveying disaffiliation. Instead, it concentrates on how laughter serves as a tool to ease tension in social interactions, striving to preserve or strengthen social bonds without delving deeper into potential negative consequences of using laughter to express disaffiliation. Future research is encouraged to build upon the findings of this article and previous studies, aiming to draw more specific conclusions that thoroughly elucidate both the constructive and detrimental impacts of laughter in conveying disaffiliation.

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