Laughing our bonds off: Conversational humour in relation to affiliation

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DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Linguistics, University of Sydney, does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text. This is also to certify that this thesis meets the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.

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ABSTRACT

The laughter that proliferates in casual conversation between friends indicates that humour is a common device in talk that does important social work. However, this humour does not involve recognisable joking structures but rather highly implicit meanings that are interpreted only by those who appear to be “in on the joke”. This thesis considers the functions of this “unfunny” type of humour, called *convivial conversational humour*, by focusing on the social relations at stake in conversations between friends in the Canadian context. Through a functional discourse analysis (Martin & Rose, 2007) of phases (cf. Gregory & Malcolm, 1995[1981]) of co-constructed humour in conversation, it is found that evaluative meanings bound with ideational experience (*evaluative couplings*) are the cause of laughter in these phases, and that these construe a social process of *affiliation*. Building on notions of bonding (e.g. Boxer & Cortès-Conde, 1997; Martin, 2004b; Stenglin, 2004) and coupling (Martin, 2000a), this thesis develops a model of affiliation to account for how we identify ourselves communally as members of a culture and create social bonds through language. Through the analysis of humorous phases, this model is developed with laughter as a *way in*, since it serves as an explicit and meaningful signal that the particular coupled meanings presented in discourse can create affiliative tension for the participants in the social sphere.

Affiliation thus describes the different strategies through which we discursively co-construct who we are, who we are not, and through laughter, who we might otherwise be in other conversations. Conversational humour between friends is shown to be a method for confirming solidarity in friendships while allowing flexibility in the construction of identity. The significance of humour as a linguistic device is emphasized through its use in social interaction as we constantly negotiate our affiliations in casual talk.
PREFACE

This thesis follows from my interest in the study of casual conversation, which started during my time as an undergraduate in the Department of Linguistics at Glendon College (York University) in Toronto, Canada where I received my Bachelor of Arts Honours in Linguistics and History. I completed a number of projects that focused on exchanges of casual talk, particularly in a functional linguistic framework, and found that this data offered a wealth of information about the social relationships that we construct constantly in everyday life. In a fourth year project, I recorded a rehearsal session and applied the systemic functional linguistic (SFL) framework to analyze the exchanges. This analysis was fruitful and interesting, as it captured the interactive dynamics of the rehearsal in such detail and offered a rich theory with which to interpret it.

Along with this undergraduate work, I was involved in a research project following my graduation that focused on the linguistic competence of Kanzi and Panbanisha, two bonobo apes who were raised in a human–bonobo environment (currently situated at the Great Ape Trust of Iowa) and who use a lexigram keyboard to communicate with their caregivers. Once again the SFL framework was applied and we focused on the discourse level of the exchange, finding that the bonobos demonstrated semantic competence in the English language. One of the most salient aspects of the linguistic interactions with these bonobos was that their exchanges were mostly natural, casual conversations rather than structured experiments. In fact, it is documented that Kanzi began to use the lexigram keyboard with his caregivers in a natural way to communicate after his experiences as a baby listening to his mother being taught the symbols.

These combined experiences sparked my fascination with the power of casual conversation and motivated me to continue to pursue its meanings. Anticipating future postgraduate study, I began to record my casual conversations with friends in a number of different contexts during my final year of undergraduate education and beyond. This data set included 12 conversations that took place in different locations in Canada and in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and it was brought with me to Sydney, Australia for use in my
doctoral work. Each of the participants signed release forms before they were recorded, and at the time, the data was not a part of any specific research project. I was interested generally in what friends talked about and how they maintained conversations for extended periods of time. More specifically, I was interested in what kinds of references to culture and social life were made in the data. However, in reviewing the audio recordings, it became clear that laughter was a significant part of all of the interactions and that the talk surrounding the laughs was not funny in any recognisable way. Thus, after consultation with my supervisor, my focus turned to laughter and the nature of the linguistic meanings surrounding laughs in conversations between friends. Using the experience from my previous work, this thesis applies the SFL framework to my collected data and conducts a discourse analysis of phases of humour.

During my candidature at the University of Sydney, a number of experiences were vital to the development of the current study. These include various presentations that I was able to do in the Friday SFL Seminar Series and at international conferences such as the 10th IPrA (International Pragmatics Association) conference, ISFC (International Systemic Functional Congresses), LACUS (Linguistics Association of Canada and the United States) conferences, and the ASHN (Australasian Humour Scholars Network) colloquium; a professional visit with humour scholar Dr. Salvatore Attardo at Texas A&M University; consultations and a co-presentation with Dr. Chris Cléirigh on the semiotics of laughter; and weekly meetings with other colleagues and PhD students. This thesis is a product of these many varied opportunities and encounters.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In pursuing this thesis, which was the most challenging undertaking of my educational training thus far, I would not have been able to accomplish what I have without the bond communities that have surrounded me.

First and foremost, my sincere and unconditional thanks go to my supervisor, Jim Martin. A pusher of boundaries, a mad scientist in his field, and also a motivator and a pillar of support and encouragement, Jim was crucial to my development as a PhD student and to the completion of this thesis. He inspired me to look at humour and guided me to keep “hacking away” at affiliation. As a supervisor, Jim is tireless in supplying time and effort to his students, organising weekly one-on-one meetings, PhD group sessions and seminars, along with social gatherings. I thank Jim for helping me to “boldly go” onwards and upwards.

From Jim’s efforts, I also had the pleasure to be part of a tight-knit, helpful and brilliant community of students and scholars. These “Martinis” provided their input on my work all through my candidature both in group sessions and in their spare time. My appreciation especially goes out to these (future) scholars:

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to Ken Tann, for our guest lecture exchanges and our e-talks about identity that helped me to better understand the concepts with which I was working.

During my time in Sydney, Ahmar Mahboob has been my first employer, my advisor, my co-creator, co-convenor and co-editor. Ahmar has inspired me by showing me how teaching, learning and producing in the academic context is most successful as a coordinated effort. He has also provided me with many outlets for my academic growth, many possibilities for making my mark in the academic world, and many occasions for pride and celebration. I will always be grateful to Ahmar for believing in my potential, and I look forward to our continued team efforts.

I am grateful for the affiliation with my associate supervisor, Chris Cléirigh, who helped me to decipher laughter through his scientific lens. In our weekly meetings, he re-oriented me to simplify when I became too complicated and to laugh when I became too rigid. I thank him for all of the time and effort he so often provides with a smile.

In the writing period of this thesis, when I required the most help, a few colleagues took time out of their own busy schedules to offer their experience and keen eyes. To Michele, Sally Humphrey and Bronwen Dyson, I express my utmost appreciation, as without them this thesis would not be readable or enjoyable.
I am grateful to Patricia Jones, my editor, who is responsible for all of the final editing and proofreading that made this thesis complete. Her efficiency, patience, professionalism and keen eye, along with the care that she put into these crucial tasks made this thesis a true final product.

I would also like to express thanks to Professor Jim Benson and Professor Bill Greaves from Glendon College, who offered their support and kept their lines of communication open to me during my overseas candidature.

Last but not least, my gratitude goes to my family and friends. Thanks to my family who were deeply missed while studying overseas: to Mom and Mark for giving me their guidance, encouragement and a place to live; to Dad and Barb for staying connected through holiday video visits and giving me so much support and love; to my sister Brittany for reminding me to keep having “fun, safety and INSPIRATION!”; to my sister Devon for keeping me grounded in nightly chats online; and to my niece and nephew Raine and Elliott for making me smile. Thanks to my friends in Sydney and to my closest friends, Sarah and Kathy, for tolerating me and reminding me to relax. Finally, I owe the most substantial debt of gratitude to Dan Cohen, a partner, friend, provider and “as you see it” artist, for travelling and teaching; for coming to Australia; for taking over all cooking duties; for talking linguistics; for listening to my whinging and supporting me unconditionally; and for so much more.
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

This thesis aligns with Halliday’s (1985, p. 48) suggestion that transcriptions should be purpose-based. Thus, humorous phases were transcribed in English orthography using a mix of transcription conventions suited for my own analytical purposes. This includes coding for such phenomena as intonation and laughter, while also providing a readable transcription suitable for a large-scale discourse analysis of long stretches of text. Hence, this thesis incorporates conventions from Eggins and Slade (1997), Psathas (1995) and Jefferson (2004) for conversational talk. The transcription key is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convention</th>
<th>Transcribed phenomenon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italics</td>
<td>stressed speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td>high volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(text)</td>
<td>unintelligible speech- transcriber’s guess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[pause _ secs] …</td>
<td>pause and length of time (if within turn, over 1.5 seconds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pause within same turn under 1.5 seconds or missing transcript section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>stuttering or cut-off speech or wording</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>text:::</td>
<td>stretched sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[text]</td>
<td>non-verbal happenings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[text?]</td>
<td>inferred non-verbal happenings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ ”</td>
<td>projected speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no really</td>
<td>(spaces between letters) beats in rhythm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>° text °</td>
<td>lowered volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(↓)</td>
<td>pitch drop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(↑)</td>
<td>pitch rise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*)</td>
<td>major change in voice quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>underlined</td>
<td>length of speech with pitch drop/lift or voice quality change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>= =</td>
<td>overlap of speech (occurs in sets of two turns):</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For cutting off other’s speech

e.g. P: Yeah ==
N: == Cool

When next participant cuts off but first continues through interruption, so interrupter does not secure a turn
C : In the end it worked out. People got into it, but nobody was into it like we
were into it like I remember == playing that game for like 40 minutes!
F: == I was never-
N: Yeah. (L)

When next participant cuts off and continues over first, securing a turn
CO: ...were going out on weekends and during the day and stuff, but at night
we were just == home
N: == Yeah and in Thailand we just- we stayed up kinda late...

Table 1: Transcription Key.

Laughter

In addition, I have created my own coding for laughter since besides focusing on where in
the sequence it occurred (cf. Jefferson, 1985), I was also interested in who emitted the
laugh and whether it was shared or not (see Table 2). Laughter was generally placed in
the transcript at the point at which it occurred, and if it interrupted speech, it was written
near the closest word.

(\text{L}) & (\text{named participant}) \text{ laughs} \\
(\text{SL}) & \text{speaker laughs (after own utterance)} \\
(\text{LV}) & \text{laughter in voice (while speaking)} \\
(\text{LO- participant(s)}) & \text{laughter by other(s) (other than speaker) during speech} \\
(\text{LA}) & \text{laughter by all} \\
(\text{CL- participant(s)}) & \text{continuous laughter (by named participant)}

Table 2: Laughter coding conventions.

Intonation

This thesis also marks “tone units” (units of intonation at the level of phonology, cf.
Halliday and Greaves, 2008) when they are particularly salient in the making of
humorous meaning following Halliday (1994a):

- Falling intonation (Halliday’s Tone 1) is marked by a full stop (.)
- Rising intonation (Tone 2) is marked by a question mark (?)
- Non-final talk with a continuous tone (Tone 3) is marked by a comma (,)
• Reserved intonation (Tone 4) is marked by a semicolon (;)
• Strong intonation (marking certain attitudinal meanings such as surprise) (Tone 5) is realised by an exclamation mark (!)
• Compound tones are marked with double conventions (e.g. Tone 53 is given a “!” and a “,” at the locations of tonic prominence: e.g. N: YOU played the! COIN GAME).  

**Appraisal** (Martin & White, 2005)

• Realisations of **affect** are highlighted in red,
• Realisations of **judgement** are highlighted in green,
• Realisations of **appreciation** are highlighted in blue,
• Realisations of the system of **graduation** are highlighted in pink.

In addition, realisations that are double-coded for more than one type of attitude (e.g. “I woulda been pissed”) or in which graduation is infused (e.g. “That’s like this amount of snow is perfect for me”) are outlined in the appropriate colour (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.3.2.1 for explanation). Negative and positive attitudes are marked by “-ve” and “+ve”. Invoked attitude (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.2.1) is marked by lighter shades of the given colours, and also indicated when the strategy used is given (e.g. “-ve judge provoked by idiom”).
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