



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.

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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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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 co-ordinated 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.

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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.

Convention *Transcribed phenomenon*

<i>Italics</i>	stressed speech
CAPS	high volume
(text)	unintelligible speech- transcriber's guess
[pause _ secs]	pause and length of time (if within turn, over 1.5 seconds)
...	pause within same turn under 1.5 seconds or missing transcript section
-	stuttering or cut-off speech or wording
text:::	stretched sound
[text]	non-verbal happenings
[text?]	inferred non-verbal happenings
“ ”	projected speech
no really	(spaces between letters) beats in rhythm
° text °	lowered volume
(↓)	pitch drop
(↑)	pitch rise
(*)	major change in voice quality
<u>underlined</u>	length of speech with pitch drop/lift or voice quality change
= =	overlap of speech (occurs in sets of two turns):
<i>For cutting off other's speech</i>	
e.g. P: Yeah ==	
N: == Cool	
<i>When next participant cuts off but first continues through interruption, so interrupter does not secure a turn</i>	
C : In the end it worked out. People got <i>into</i> it, but <i>nobody</i> 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.

(L)	(named participant) laughs
(SL)	speaker laughs (after own utterance)
(LV)	laughter in voice (while speaking)
(LO- participant(s))	laughter by other(s) (other than speaker) during speech
(LA)	laughter by all
(CL- participant(s))	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”).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
PREFACE	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
LIST OF TABLES	xix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION 1.1 DEFINING THE UNIT OF STUDY: CONVERSATION AND HUMOUR	1
1.1.1 Casual Conversation	2
1.1.1.1 Approach and motivation to study humour	3
1.1.2 Convivial Conversational Humour	6
SECTION 1.2 DATA	7
1.2.1 Collection of Data	7
1.2.1.1 Participants	8
1.2.1.2 Insider Analysis	9
SECTION 1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIMS	10
SECTION 1.4 SCOPE AND ORGANISATION OF THIS THESIS	12
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND APPROACH	16
SECTION 2.1 HUMOUR, LINGUISTICS AND CONVERSATION	17
2.1.1 Traditions of humour theory and linguistics	18
2.1.1.1 Chafe’s “feeling of non-seriousness” and relief theory	18
2.1.1.2 Script-based semantic theories of humour and incongruity theory	19
2.1.1.3 Social linguistic studies of humour and superiority theory	24
2.1.2 Conversational humour studies	26
2.1.2.1 The solidarity orientation of friendship humour	27
2.1.2.2 Bonding in humour	30
2.1.2.3 Studies that take laughter as point of departure	35
2.1.2.3.1 Partington’s study of “laughter-talk”	38
2.1.2.4 Connections to the current study	42
SECTION 2.2 THEORETICAL APPROACH: SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS	43
2.2.1 Hierarchies	44

2.2.1.1	Realisation	45
2.2.1.1.1	Language and social context	46
2.2.1.2	Instantiation	49
2.2.1.2.1	Semogenesis	52
2.2.1.3	Individuation	53
2.2.2	Complementarities	58
2.2.2.1	Axis: System and structure	58
2.2.2.2	Metafunctions	62
2.2.2.2.1	APPRAISAL theory	66
2.2.2.2.2	Bonding theory	69
2.2.2.3	Summary of SFL concepts	71
2.2.3	Humour studies in an SFL framework	72
2.2.3.1	The social context of humour	73
2.2.3.2	Humour and APPRAISAL	77
SECTION 2.3 METHODOLOGY		81
2.3.1	Extracting texts for analysis: Conversational exchanges	81
2.3.2	Discourse analysis	89
2.3.2.1	Interpersonal systems	90
2.3.2.2	Ideational systems	94
2.3.2.3	Textual systems	98
SECTION 2.4 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER TWO		100
CHAPTER 3: LAUGHTER IN CONVERSATIONAL HUMOUR		102
SECTION 3.1 LAUGHTER AS A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC		103
3.1.1	Taking a systemic functional perspective on multimodality	105
3.1.1.1	Modelling laughter as a semiotic system	106
3.1.1.2	Interpersonal orientations to laughing	110
3.1.1.2.1	Protolinguistic origins	110
3.1.1.2.2	Laughter and attitude	113
3.1.1.2.3	Laughter and speech function	119
3.1.2	Laughter expressions in convivial conversational humour	122
3.1.2.1	System network for laughter	123
3.1.2.2	Analysis of laughter expressions	129
SECTION 3.2 LAUGHTER IN HUMOROUS PHASES		131
3.2.1	Laughing and the conversational exchange	132
3.2.2	The phasal unit of conversational humour	136
3.2.3	Analysis of humorous phases	138
SECTION 3.3 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER THREE		144
CHAPTER 4: NEGOTIATING EVALUATIVE COUPLINGS		146
SECTION 4.1 UNFOLDING MEANINGS SURROUNDING LAUGHTER		147
4.1.1	Prosody in the humorous phase	148
4.1.2	Bonding and prosody	150
4.1.3	Laughter reaction	152
SECTION 4.2 COUPLINGS AS LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE		156
4.2.1	Coupling in humorous phases	159

4.2.2	Implicit couplings	163
4.2.2.1	Familiar values in conversation between friends	163
4.2.2.2	Tokens and evaluative couplings	164
4.2.3	Strategies for invoking attitudes in couplings	166
4.2.3.1	Provoking attitudes in couplings: Idioms and allusions	167
4.2.3.1.1	Idioms	168
4.2.3.1.2	Allusions	173
4.2.3.2	Flagging attitudes in couplings: Realisations of all systems of graduation	176
4.2.3.2.1	Intensifying attitudes	177
4.2.3.2.2	Quantifying attitudes	178
4.2.3.2.3	Sharpening and softening attitudes	180
4.2.3.3	Affording attitudes in couplings: ENGAGEMENT, pronouns and naming	182
4.2.3.3.1	Opposing points of view in ENGAGEMENT	183
4.2.3.3.2	Dividing and aligning: Inclusive and exclusive pronouns	189
4.2.3.3.3	Naming persons and communities	193
4.2.3.4	“X-phemisms” indicating attitude	197
4.2.3.5	Summary of strategies for invoking attitudes in couplings	200
SECTION 4.3 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER FOUR		201
CHAPTER 5: AFFILIATION		203
SECTION 5.1 THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF AFFILIATION		204
5.1.1	Negotiating bonds as social patterns	206
5.1.2	Affiliation and identity	211
5.1.3	Strategies of affiliation	217
5.1.3.1	Communing: straightforward affiliating	218
5.1.3.2	Laughing: Deferring bonds	221
5.1.3.2.1	Making vs. acknowledging wrinkles	224
5.1.3.2.2	Negotiating an identity space	227
5.1.3.3	Condemning: Rejecting bonds	232
5.1.4	Summary of affiliation as a social process	234
SECTION 5.2 LEVELS OF COMMUNITY: AN AFFILIATION PERSPECTIVE ON THE CLINE OF INDIVIDUATION		235
5.2.1	Theorising affiliation	236
5.2.1.1	Levels of affiliation on the individuation cline	238
5.2.1.2	Visualising the affiliation process through the individuation cline	239
5.2.1.3	Bonds as minimal social unit	248
5.2.1.4	Communities as bond networks	253
5.2.1.4.1	Diagramming bond networks as <i>social</i> networks	260
5.2.1.4.2	Labelling bond networks	263
5.2.1.5	Culture as a system of bonds	266
SECTION 5.3 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER FIVE		270
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS		272
SECTION 6.1 CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS		272
6.1.1	The dynamic nature of couplings	273
6.1.2	APPRAISAL challenges	276
6.1.3	The contributions of affiliation	281
6.1.4	Linguistic humour research and this study	281

SECTION 6.2 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS	282
6.2.1 Modelling affiliation	283
6.2.2 Characterisation and the affiliation perspective on humour	286
6.2.3 Focus on ideology: The boundaries of what we can laugh off	291
6.2.4 More on laughter and visual semiotics	292
6.2.5 Other applications of affiliation: Reintegrating, restoring and creating a fan base	294
SECTION 6.3 CONCLUSION TO THIS STUDY	296
<u>APPENDIX A: TABLES OF ANALYSIS</u>	<u>297</u>
<u>APPENDIX B: TRANSCRIBED TEXT FOR OTHER CHAPTER EXAMPLES</u>	<u>396</u>
<u>APPENDIX C: SOUND CLIPS</u>	<u>SEE INSIDE BACK COVER</u>
<u>REFERENCES</u>	<u>402</u>

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: SFL strata of language organised into content plane and expression plane	45
Figure 2.2: Social context in the realisation hierarchy above language	46
Figure 2.3: Martin's (1992) genre and register as semiotic systems in the realisation hierarchy above language	47
Figure 2.4: Cline of instantiation	50
Figure 2.5: Scales of semogenesis	52
Figure 2.6: Kinds of variation in relation to instantiation and stratification	54
Figure 2.7: Individuation alongside the instantiation and realisation hierarchies	55
Figure 2.8: The cline of individuation	56
Figure 2.9: Affiliation as a complementary, bottom-up perspective on the cline of individuation	57
Figure 2.10: System network of MOOD with realisations	60
Figure 2.11: System network of topological choices in sound quality	61
Figure 2.12: Metafunctions of language	62
Figure 2.13: Metafunctions of language encoding meanings in three dimensions of register	63
Figure 2.14: System network of APPRAISAL	67
Figure 2.15: Inscribed and invoked appraisal	68
Figure 2.16: Types of humour in the SFL hierarchy according to Simpson (2003)	74
Figure 2.17: Eggins and Slade's (1997) speech function network	85
Figure 2.18: Moves as rank below exchange in discourse semantics	88

Figure 2.19: Nuclearity in the clause diagram from Martin and Rose (2007)	96
Figure 3.1: Laughter as a semiotic system alongside language	107
Figure 3.2: A silent or “horizontal” bared teeth display and a relaxed open-mouth display in two chimpanzees	111
Figure 3.3: ARTICULATION system of laughter sound potential	123
Figure 3.4: PROSODY system of laughter sound potential	125
Figure 3.5: A system network of laughter expression in convivial conversational humour	127
Figure 4.1: Prosody of positive attitudes towards <i>pie party</i>	151
Figure 4.2: Interactants bond around positive attitudes towards the holiday; laugh around positive attitudes towards eating then dieting	155
Figure 4.3: GRADUATION system network	177
Figure 4.3: ENGAGEMENT system	184
Figure 5.1: Attitude + ideation coupling construing a shared bond	207
Figure 5.2: Both a potential bond and an implicated bond underlying talk construed by a coupling in humour	210
Figure 5.3: Couplings construe a Fun Pie Party bond that connects a community of friends	220
Figure 5.4: Laughing off a wrinkle caused by an unshared potential bond	223
Figure 5.5: A space for identity negotiation	229
Figure 5.6: Levels of affiliation on the individuation cline	238
Figure 5.7: Process of affiliation through the cline of individuation	240
Figure 5.8: Communing affiliation along the individuation cline	242
Figure 5.9: Laughing affiliation along the individuation cline	244
Figure 5.10: Condemning affiliation along the individuation cline	247

Figure 5.11: Bond on cline of individuation construed by coupling in instantiated text	249
Figure 5.12: Coin Game bond negotiated differently over time and across bond networks	252
Figure 5.13: Simplified individuation cline in affiliation	254
Figure 5.14: Laughing off bonds associated with the female gender ideological network	259
Figure 5.15: Milroy's (1987) social networks	261
Figure 5.16: Varying density and plexity between ideological bond networks and personal bond networks on the cline of individuation	262
Figure 5.17: Culture as a system of bonds on the cline of individuation	266
Figure 6.1: Martin's (2008b) suggested coupling motifs	274
Figure 6.2: Coupling mapped along the instantiation cline	275
Figure 6.3: Relations of affiliation as a solar system	284
Figure 6.4: Affiliation negotiation of bonds in time perspective	285
Figure 6.5: Actors Patrick Swayze and Chris Farley play roles as "Chippendales" strippers	289
Figure 6.6: Sacha Baron Cohen as "Borat" and as "Bruno"	290

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Conversational uses of laughter from Partington (2006)	35
Table 2.2: Speech functions	83
Table 2.3: Speech function pairs: initiating and responding	83
Table 2.4: Table of discourse semantic systems adapted from Martin and Rose (2007)	90
Table 3.1: Conversational exchange from opening move to opening move	133
Table 3.2: Laughter continuing past borders of move exchange	134
Table 3.3: Laughter ending before the last move of the exchange	135
Table 3.4: Analysis of a phase of convivial conversational humour	142
Table 5.1: Affiliation strategies	217