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‘‘Hahaha’’: Laughter as a resource to manage *WhatsApp* conversations

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Abstract

This study deals with the interactional achievement of laughter in WhatsApp conversations. We aim to describe how texters mobilize ‘‘transcribed’’ laughter (i.e. *hahaha*), and to what extent laughter is a resource for managing the interactional contingencies linked to the asynchronous nature of the written conversations in which participants are engaged. Using both a conversation analytic approach and quantification, we analyzed 43 WhatsApp conversations collected in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. By focusing on the position of laughter in a message, its sequential position, and the management of turn allocation before and after a message that contains laugh particles, we show that participants recurrently produce volunteered and unilateral laughs combined with assessments as responsive actions. However, depending on the position of laughter in the message and its sequential organization, participants orient to different courses of action. The first pattern includes standalone unilateral laughter (i.e. the message is composed only of laugh particles) that is followed by another message by the same speaker, in which he/she produces an assessment, leading to sequence closing and topic termination. In the second pattern, the speaker laughs in turn-initial position before producing an assessment in the same message; in this case, the next message is performed by the partner, providing him/her with the opportunity to prolong the ongoing topic. Laughter is thus a powerful resource in that it allows participants to orient to interactional moments that are particularly delicate to manage, especially in asynchronous conversations: message-taking and sequence closing/topic termination. Laughter thus opens a window onto how participants display expertise in the management of WhatsApp conversations. Given the impact that asynchronous exchanges may have in social life, the ability to exhibit an identity of ‘‘doing being’’ an expert of new communication technologies appears to be a key competence that deserves further investigation.

Keywords: Laughter; WhatsApp conversations; Conversation Analysis; Quantitative methods

1. Introduction

This study deals with the interactional achievement of laughter in WhatsApp[1] conversations. While texting has become ubiquitous in everyday life (in February 2016, there were 1 billion monthly WhatsApp users worldwide[2]), the interactional procedures that participants mobilize to manage asynchronous interactions have so far been explored only to a limited extent. Existing studies show that the management of communication via texting is particularly challenging. Recipients

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[1] WhatsApp is a mobile messaging application which allows the user to exchange messages without having to pay for SMSs.
[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/260819/number-of-monthly-active-whatsapp-users/ (accessed 10.10.16).

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have no access to the online construction of partners' messages, but only to the final version of the texts (Spagnolli and Gamberini, 2007; Hutchby and Tanna, 2008). For a writer, it might thus sometimes become difficult to decide at which point to write back and take the floor (see, in contrast, Sacks et al., 1974 on turn-taking systems in face-to-face interactions). The technical advances in smartphones now allow users to access previous messages–and thus the whole conversation –, providing them with the opportunity to bypass adjacency between the response and the partner's previous messages (Hutchby and Tanna, 2008). However, this flexibility in terms of sequential contiguity (see Sacks, 1987 on the contiguity rule) may also lead to sequential desynchronizations (e.g. when a participant responds to a question that the partner produced a few messages before, while the latter is expecting a response to his/her most recent message; see Herring, 1999 on the notion of ''disrupted adjacency''). Yet studies on the resources that participants use to manage the interactional contingencies linked to the asynchronous nature of the conversations are still rare (see Section 2). In contrast, there exists a large body of empirical research on face-to-face communication showing that laughter is a powerful resource for achieving relevant conversational goals such as managing turn-taking or topic trajectory and dealing with interactional problems that emerge from the ongoing talk (see Glenn and Holt, 2013a, for an overview). Although ''transcribed'' laughter (i.e. *hahaha*) appears to be omnipresent in text-based conversations (see e.g. Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008; Varnhagen et al., 2010), existing studies give greater focus to smileys, emojis and playful acronyms (e.g. *lol* for ''laughing out loud''), mainly from a quantitative and sociolinguistic perspective. Hence, the question as to how and why participants produce laugh particles in the course of WhatsApp conversations needs further investigation.

We thus aimed to fill this gap by shedding light on the interactional achievement of transcribed laughter in WhatsApp conversations. We analyzed 43 WhatsApp conversations collected in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, using a mixed-method approach that combines the conversation analytic (CA) approach (Sacks et al., 1974) and quantitative analyses. We show that participants recurrently produce volunteered and unilateral laughs combined with assessments as responsive actions. Focusing on the position of laughter in the message, its sequential position, and the management of turn allocation before and after the message containing laugh particles, we point out that participants methodically organize laughter as a way of managing interactional moments that are particularly delicate, especially in asynchronous conversations: that is, message-taking and sequence closing/topic termination.

Laughter thus sheds light on how participants jointly negotiate key points in the management of asynchronous conversations, and how they adapt their interactional skills to the specific ''rules of the game'' of texting. Given the ''laughing methods'' participants deploy in WhatsApp conversations, laughter also appears to be a way of ''doing being'' an expert in dealing with specific technological affordances and thus seems instrumental for displaying an identity as a competent texter. Given the pervasiveness of text-based communication in everyday life, knowing how and when it is appropriate to laugh in text-based conversations, and thus displaying expertise in new technologies, constitutes a central tool for people's involvement in social life.

2. The interactional management of WhatsApp conversations: what about laughter?

The written and asynchronous nature of text-based communication, especially text messaging, raises questions as to how participants deal with the specific interactional affordances of the type of communication they are involved in. Several studies have examined text messaging as an activity jointly managed by participants and have focused on the study of interactional regularities of texting (Laursen, 2005; Spagnolli and Gamberini, 2007; Hutchby and Tanna, 2008; Rettie, 2009; Günthner, 2011; König, 2015).

Previous research points out the conversational skills that texters deploy to manage the interactional challenges linked to text-based communication. Hutchby and Tanna (2008) examined sequential organization in a corpus of 1250 SMSs using conversation analytic methods and illustrated similarities and differences with regard to face-to-face interaction. The authors described how participants who tend to pack several different actions into one message (creating so-called *package messages*) use text-specific coordinated methods to manage these multi-unit turns. Unlike in face-to-face interaction, where the last action deployed is usually the first responded to (rule of contiguity; see Sacks, 1987), in texting the second participant tends to respond in the order in which the initiated actions have been deployed by the first participant (for similar observations, see also Günthner, 2011; Spagnolli and Gamberini, 2007). König (2015) also suggested that when package messages are offered by the first participant, the second participant tends to answer, still in the chronological order of the proposed first pair parts, but using separate messages for each of the second pair parts (see also Morel, 2016). Spagnolli and Gamberini (2007) further suggested that turns (i.e. messages) in texting follow their own preference rules and that sending a message back is more important than responding to a given action that a message contains. It appears in fact that actions are often not explicitly responded to, which does not however disrupt the course of interaction. Rettie's (2009) observations point in a somewhat similar direction, showing that the brevity of many text messages appears to be linked to interpretative ambiguities which participants report as not problematic. On the contrary, participants seem to exploit these to keep things undetermined and to construe a way of interacting in which it is acceptable to leave meaning open (which is useful e.g. in nascent romantic liaisons). However, how and when it is