

Laughter as a strategic device: Exploring its pragmatic functions in conversations

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Abstract - This study investigates the pragmatic functions of laughter in everyday conversation and explores its interactional significance. The primary objective is to understand how laughter, beyond signaling humor, serves multiple communicative purposes across different social contexts. A corpus of forty-one spontaneous conversations was compiled, comprising 20 male-female and 21 same-gendered dyads, with participants aged between 18 and 29. Each session lasted approximately 1.5 hours, resulting in rich data for analysis. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative frequency counts. Analytically, laughter was examined in terms of its placement, function, and response within interactional sequences. The findings reveal that laughter not only enriches discourse with humour but also facilitates inferencing, expresses relational closeness, mitigates face-threatening acts, prompts requests, eases conflict, and provides access to otherwise withheld information. Quantitative analysis highlighted notable gender-based patterns in initiated, responsive, and one-sided laughter. Male and female participants differed in how they used and responded to laughter, suggesting gendered communication tendencies. Overall, the study concludes that laughter plays a central role in shaping conversational dynamics and often functions as a barometer of interpersonal connection. It underscores the need to view laughter as a serious pragmatic tool embedded in the architecture of talk.

Keywords: laughter, pragmatic functions, spontaneous conversations, multifaceted phenomenon, reveal inferences

1. Introduction

The dynamics of conversational interaction are numerous. Little movements, gestures, outward facial expressions, (un)serious demeanor, bitter or sweet words, and phrases can shift all the attention, mood, and direction of conversation flow, whether in turn-taking, interruptive practices, attentiveness, topics, epistemic dominance, etc. They can also completely end the conversation or relationship between the talkers.

Following the initial conversational turn, in which, among other speech acts, critical questions may be included, the recipients may intentionally choose to reveal only implicitly what exactly they are trying to convey or what is being implied (Gubina & Deppermann, 2024; Haugh 2017; Drew, 2018; Heritage & Clayman, 2011). They may insinuate or infer messages through incorporating specific hedging devices and other resources of interaction (Oswald, 2022; Ghahraman et al., 2023; Mondada, 2016) or may reject that they have inferred something (Gubina & Deppermann, 2024). In this regard, when the core message is unfolded indirectly through linguistic or paralinguistic strategies, listeners are more interested in what is meant than what is said (Bonolumi et al., 2020). The lack of proper interpretation can cause misunderstandings and conflicts (Obasi & Udofot, 2013), especially in asymmetric power relations (Vöge, 2010, 2025; McLachlan, 2022).

In many situated language usages, speakers frequently convey implicatures through nonlinguistic cues, whether because they are afraid, shy, incompetent, or prohibited from expressing the literal message directly to certain interlocutors. One of the paralinguistic resources that can be employed as part of a “positive face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987) or as “trouble-resistant” (Jefferson, 1984) and trigger the direct meaning of inferences is *laughter*, which has sparked a growing interest in interactional studies (Haugh & Musgrave, 2019; Glenn & Holt, 2013; Vettin & Todt, 2004; Grillo & Enesi, 2022; Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025; Mazzocconi & Ginzburg 2023; Lyle, 2023; Kohler, 2008; Oswald, 2022; Ginzburg et al., 2020; Sacks, 1992; Jensen, 2018; Raclaw & Ford, 2017; Norrick, 2010; McLachlan, 2022, 2023; Vöge, 2010; Sert & Jacknick, 2015; Bachorowski et al., 2001). In sequences of turns, it was proven that it can be invited, one-sided, volunteered, first, second, or third-positioned laughter, reciprocated, “aborted,” stand-alone utterance or outrightly rejected (Jefferson, 2004, 1979; Haakana, 2002:211; Ginzburg et al., 2020, Greer, 2015, Mazzoconi et al., 2020).

Laughter is widely recognized to be triggered after the punchline of a joke that provokes laughter or funny unplanned scenarios that make the audience enjoy the humor (Norrick, 2010; Osvaldsson, 2004; Jensen, 2018; Partington, 2006). It may serve as a pre-telling about positive mood, showing empathy towards interlocutors, or as feedback after hearing something that reveals unexpected truths. In such cases, it may be considered an adjacency pair (Glenn & Holt 2013; Schegloff, 2007) as it responds relevantly to the purpose aimed by the one who wants to trigger it.

The essential function of laughter is considered to be social bonding with others, enhancing the mental well-being of an individual, and having a general positive worldview. “Having fun and laughing together during a conversation is one of the most fundamental ways in which we attach to each other and thereby acquire a sense of well-being and adherence” (Jensen, 2018:239). Thus, generally, laughter promotes physical/mental well-being (Lyle, 2023). However, the social role of laughter goes far beyond mere entertainment or comedy. Even though it is intricately linked to humor, there is a distinction between these two concepts (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025), as laughter can be used for various reasons, except as a response to something funny. It may carry out pragmatic functions such as sharing common experiences (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025), indicate status (Vöge 2010, McLachlan, 2022), foster cooperation and maintain the flow of interaction (Mazzocconi & Ginzburg 2023), to engage in conversations (Mazzocconi, 2023) etc. In cases of employer-employee relations, the context imposes “a laughter reaction”. “Rights enjoyed by high status speakers may account for their relative success in ‘making the hearer laugh’ as low status listeners feel obliged to acknowledge the laughables of their high-status speakers with laughter (McLachlan, 2022). Thus, since their salary is also correlated with their employer's assessment of their compliance with him or her, they believe that they must indicate agreement. Another intriguing viewpoint is drawn on (non)serious turns (Holt, 2013) and failed humor (Bell, 2015), which suggest the potential undesirable outcome when something is spoken to cause laughter and hearers don’t respond as it is initially expected.

Despite great strides made toward offering new views in exploring laughter in interaction, there is a lack of research in the novel approach of seeing laughter as a strategically ordered communicative tool that is used purposefully, not just for spontaneous reactions to casual humor or joking. This paper analyzes naturally occurring conversations and identifies some other discursive pragmatic functions of laughter during talking, based on its placement, interactional effect, immediate reactions, etc.

When communicating in person, most of the time, nonverbal or paralinguistic behaviors such as body language, facial expressions, and prosodic changes are used in addition to words. Thus, many hidden messages can be conveyed using other modalities except verbal resources. These signs often convey emotions, offer specific insights, or suggest honesty, ease, confidence, (misunderstanding), affection, etc. “Nonverbal communication is information, emotion, a movement that is expressed without words and without the help of language.” (Grillo & Enesi, 2022). It is one of the main ingredients of the socialization process, which “takes place throughout the whole human lifespan” (Declercq, 2021). As Charles Darwin (1929) has stated, “it is difficult



to determine, with certainty, what are the movements of the features and of the body, which commonly characterize certain states of the mind." That's why they must be put at *indirect type of communication*. However, compared to words themselves, body language can be clearer in terms of expressing real attitudes (Tracy et al., 2015; Mast & Cousin, 2013). However, compared to words themselves, body language can be clearer in terms of expressing real attitudes (Tracy et al., 2015; Mast & Cousin, 2013).

Laughter, as one of nonverbal signs, is mainly manifested visually (with acoustic properties) and doesn't have a direct propositional content (a view that has been challenged by Ginsburg et al., 2020) but only accompanies language (Szameitat et al., 2009; Glenn & Holt, 2013). It is a central ingredient that foregrounds intimacy, a good mood in interaction, and defines the closeness among persons. "Sharing laughter is seen to exhibit such positive interactional features as intimacy, affiliation, and alignment, as well as the sharing of a similar sense of humor and a similar attitude towards something" (Haakana, 2002:209). As a phenomenon, laughter cuts across many scientific fields, including sociology, psychology, and ethnomethodology. It is a phenomenon that combines a wide range of modalities: vocal (the production of laugh tokens or particles), facial expression (e.g., smiling), and body movement (e.g., the shaking of the torso) (Haakana, 2010; Mondada, 2016). It reflects the joy conversants are having while talking with each other, but it "can be employed strategically" (Glenn & Holt 2013). There is also a difference between a smile showing happiness and one that shows the masking of negative feelings leaked after smiling (Ekman & Friesen, 1982, Author, 2023).

Laughter can be utilized to construct identities and establish membership categories (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2013) or index different lapses that that could be made during conversation that would hinder the discussion from moving further (Haugh & Musgrave, 2019). "Since conventions and symbols, which are key to meaning-making, are established by and within cultures and societies, signification and communication are also culturally and socially constituted (Wilson & Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2023). As a matter of fact, different nonverbal signs that are used to convey or implicate meaning enter into the *system of semiotic resources*, "which are socially conditioned and culturally shared options, are created with certain purposes in mind and used by communicators in a dynamic process continually adapted to social encounters" (Wilson & Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2023). E.g., people can read a smile on someone's face as an indication of happiness, humor, and an encouragement to smile back.

As a paralinguistic/conversational resource, laughter has been central in conversation analysis, particularly since the imminent works of Gail Jefferson in Conversation Analysis (1979, 1984, 1985, 2004). The object of study was its production in various contexts, e.g., international business meetings (Markaki et al., 2010), doctor-patient interaction (Haakana, 1999, 2001, 2002), institutional interaction (Fatigante & Orletti, 2013), managing divergence in evaluation (Raclaw & Ford, 2017) as a response to jokes or humor (Norrick, 2010; Jensen, 2016; Osisanwo, 2024; Bell, 2015), as feedback to complaints (Holt, 2012), humor that incites laughter in social media (Barahmeh, 2024) and other different modalities it represents. As shortly mentioned, it can also be employed as a tool to defer to the supervisors without laughing sincerely, as persons with low status "may feel obliged to take up laughables" (McLachlan 2022). In other words, "the greater the hierarchical difference between complainant and complaine, the more central laughter is in realizing the complaint" (Vöge 2010; Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025).

Taking into consideration its placement in the conversation, intention, and other related factors, in many instances, laughter doesn't allow the conversation to freeze (Schegloff, 2007, Haakana, 2002) – that's why it is deeply embedded in human interaction.

Given the significance of this device in wholesome partnerships and achieving conversational goals, we will provide a more precise definition of its capacity to achieve some specific goals. This study encourages research of laughter in interaction and its communicative functions, which may be useful for future studies, given the majority of earlier studies have concentrated on laughing as an instant response to joking or humour.

2. Method

This is mainly descriptive research based on forty-one 1.5-hour conversations (61.5 hours altogether) in mostly informal settings (cafeteria, workplace, or classroom) between close friends that explores the pragmatic effects of laughter bouts during the talk “worked out in-and-through interaction” (Glenn & Holt 2013). More specifically, the qualitative method of Conversation Analysis (Schegloff et al., 1974; Schegloff, 2007) was used, combined with a pragmatic analysis, to capture deeper nuances of interaction, such as interpreting the laughter in the social context to make sure “all aspects of the talk had been accurately transcribed” (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025). “The timing of laughter” was closely examined in order to determine how the goals were accomplished through this nonverbal cue. Based on the context and the explicit words, the hidden intentions were inferred (Osisanwo et al., 2024). Thus, based on the position of the laugher (McLachlan 2022), we have defined the “preferred reactions” that were intended to be elicited.

For research purposes, we appointed an approximately equal number of two genders, 20 males and 21 females (N = 41). Each conversation included two respondents, except one of them, in which three participated. The same respondents then switched into informants of the different gender. One selected the conversation partner, and the selected person consented. Respondents aged 18–29 were recruited from the University of Prishtina and a media company in Prishtina. They are the authors' acquaintances and know each other quite well. This has made it easier when they were encouraged to speak comfortably (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025). The main aim of the study has not been told to them. However, they agreed with the procedure of recording, sometimes, intimate conversations and exploiting them only for scientific purposes. Some quantitative results of the pragmatic functions found in our material, taking into account different and same-gendered conversations, were conducted. Furthermore, we scrutinized the role of gender in starting and ending laughter rounds that occurred during conversations. Our research will contribute to a deeper comprehension of the function that laughter serves in the talks under investigation.

We have investigated parts of conversations that display peculiar interactional roles that laughter plays and how it is strategically put within conversation. We examined “the laughable” (Glenn, 2003; Ginzburg et al., 2020) and the linguistic “movements” that cause it, and we determined the purpose concealed behind the laughter¹. Respondents talked about socially shared issues, different hearsays, or secrets they held for a long time, some of which were uncovered when turns of the addressee were filled with laughter or “nonserious turns” due to “the heat of the moment.” The conversations were translated by the author and the selected excerpts display our aim to delve into the factors that directly cause

Given that almost every conversation has an inherent intention in itself, we laid out some significant communicative functions that appear to be achieved through sequences of laughter, aside from “instances of joking and humor” (Osvaldsson, 2004). In the result sections, pieces of some *conversation events* (Vettin & Todt, 2004) were selected to show concrete reactions after laughter gets involved. The functions were defined considering the *audience and speaker's laughter* (Provine, 1993), as both parties contributed and dictated the chains of turns that caused the general pragmatic effect in communication.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Speakers may try to generate inferences from the addressee through laughter and check if involving this element will result in drawing some necessary information. In the example below, it worked quite well:

¹ Smiles detected by the tone of respondents' voices were not counted as laughter bouts, except when it was heard the rhythmical contraction that characterizes a typical round of laughter.



(1)

Relevant data: They talk about (non)separation of Alba's ex-friends; Erik has a crush on Alba and she knows it

1) Alba (smiling): A *kokan kthy*: *ba:shk a? se e niva at motrën e saj tu kallxu*↓

So, they are back together? I heard her sister tell the story

2) Erik: *Po: e:dhe arsyja osht*↓ *kusheri:na e saj bukuro::she*↓

Yes and the reason is her beautiful cousin

3) Alba: *[oo:oo hhahahaha*

4) Erik: *=a e din çka , osht kshu sekret qy:sh e din, po arsyja e ndarjes u kon sho:qnia e ti: me armi:qt e saj*↓

5) You know what.. as you know, it's a secret but the main reason for the separation is his friendship with her enemies

6) Alba: *oo:: si gjithmo:n dram pas dra:me hahaha kom menu qe gji:thçka ka marr fund, po motra ve:t*↓...

ooo like always drama after drama hahahaha I thought everything had ended, but her sister...

7) Erik: *[o tia kishe pa fty:rën*↑

Oo if you'd see her face

8) Alba: *hhuh*

9) Erik: *a se ke di:t*↑

so you didn't know?

10) Alba: *Jo::*

No

11) Erik: *Ani po tlutna mo:s përhap çka trego:va*

Well please don't spread out what I just told you

(2.0)

12) Erik: *E tepro:va*↑

I exaggerated

13) Alba: *=E qysh i ki pu:nt me kompani:?*

So, how is the company doing?

The "topic-initial utterance" (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984), "they are back together" (line 1) suggests that Alba targets a prior interaction, as by not using names, it is clear that speakers have discussed the couple's presumed reunion on previous occasions. After seeing Alba in a good mood (smiling), Erik maintains his good mood to display appreciation (Ikeda & Bysouth, 2013). He continues going deeper into a topic, 'coloring' discourse continuously with jokes, as he sees that topic is entertaining for her (his crush). This also reiterates the fact that gossip intertwined with laughter is the best form of gossip (Morreall, 1994).

After Alba joins in the laughter, Erik doesn't spare himself from disclosing 'new facts' to continue cheering her up (line 4). When laughter constitutes an entire turn (Glenn & Holt, 2013:6) (line 3), Erik reveals what he shouldn't have (something deemed as a secret: line 5), as he is clearly affected by the fact that Alba doesn't directly tell him that she did not have a clue about this, though laughing with surprise implies that "the hearer is incompetent about the topic" (Gubina & Deppermann, 2024). So, in this case, "the addressee has less knowledge" (Gubina & Deppermann, 2024), but just like this example, "communicative commitment is not always in concert with epistemic commitment" (Oswald, 2022), because Alba leaves open the possibility that she is aware of the full story when she claims she heard the story (line 1, 6).

Even though Erik wants to blur the literal meaning by stating that it was an exaggeration, laughter exercised its own effect to unpack many details, and now he considers troublesome the secrets he just revealed, what adds a dimension of self-irony (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025). That's why he asks her to keep everything she heard hidden. After placing him in a suppressing position, Alba totally shifts the topic, in the last line: *How is the company doing?*, which is a move that opens up a new topic for the participants (Parton, 2014).

As a means to elicit secrets, Alba may have leveraged the fact that she knows Eric likes her and that he would do anything to deepen their closeness. The excerpt shows the role of

laughter in emotional engagement and the desire of one party to keep the conversation going, hence discovering many details “not meant to be uncovered”.

3.1.1 Flirting

Laughter can also indicate intimacy between speakers. Consequently, it can play a critical role in inciting the person who romantically likes someone to take a step further. Parts of the conversation below show its direct effect on getting freer to switch to more personal topics.

(2)

Relevant data: Norik likes Elona romantically

1) Elona: *Ti kurr' se hu:q ditlindjen tem (.) mlu:n kre jt*

You never miss my birthday you drive me crazy (smiles)

2) Norik: *=Leht osh me majt nmen...o:sht fu:ndi mujit tem tpreferum*

It's easy to memorize...It is the end of my favorite month,

(.)

3) Elona: *[.Janari osh muji yt preferum? Osh fto:ft, ka provime*

January is your preferred month? It's cold there are exams

4) Norik: *=Po osh nditlindja =jote*

But it's your birthday

(.)

5) *Ty tshoh si mrekuilli qysh mos me kujtu?*

I view you as a miracle how wouldn't I remember it?

6) Elona: *hahaaha qikjo: osh arsyeja ?*

hahaha that's the reason?

7) Norik: *hahaha cka: nese tho:m po?*

Hahaha what If I say yes

8) Elona: *=hahaha a du:het me te besu hahahha?*

hahaha should I believe it hahahha

9) Norik: *=hahaha natyri:sht. Nese tki:sha thirr per kafe qitash, a ish kon ma .bindese?*

Hahaha of course. If I invite you for a coffee now, would it be more convincing

10) Elona: *hahaha ne:sër .kan dhje:t?*

hahhaha tomorrow at ten o'clock

The conversation begins with Elona, noticing that Norik doesn't miss any of her birthdays, which is in January, and she expresses this appreciation to him directly. After that, he calls January his favorite month, just because it's her birthday (lines 2, 4), and that is when he somehow starts flirting with her. Elona's feedback, accompanied by laughter, is a positive sign that motivates Norik to laugh back (line 7) and make further steps in getting closer and enhancing their interpersonal relationship, as “the person who laughs first is seen to invite the other one to laugh” (Haakana, 2002:214). Elona actually makes him laugh only by finding amusing things that he says. This reciprocated laughter also reduces the social asymmetry (Francis et al., 1999), as Norik indicated that he feels in some way inferior to her (line 5). In this way, Norik sees the laughter as an overt hint to continue flirting and go deeper into expressing his interest in her. Her laughter gives him permission to continue flirting and indirectly strengthens the bond between them. “Individuals may laugh in ways that show them getting ready to take a next turn at talk” (Glenn & Holt, 2013:24). After asking whether he can be direct in confirming that January is his favorite month because of her, Elona starts laughing, asks a question, and then laughs again.

In summary, when Norik is out of words or a little embarrassed to be direct about his feelings, laughter helps him to show his real emotions, as “nonverbal communication in most cases is used by the giver to reinforce or better explain what he is saying (Grillo & Enesi, 2022:305).

3.1.2 Implying that something is true

Laughing may serve as a method to make the other recipient “spill the beans” or make him/her suggest that there is something true that s/he is afraid of or not allowed to admit.



(3)

Relevant data: Jeta wants to know whether Anita broke up with Agim

1) Jeta(smiling): *Dometho:n ↑ Anita e pa:ska kry↑ lidhjen me Agi:min↑*

So Anita has finished the relationship with Agim?

2) Melisa: *Ha::hha:a skom le:je me tregu↓ tbe:tohem*

Ha::ha:ha I'm not allowed to tell I swear

3) Jeta: *↑Ftyra po trego↑n gjithcka tlu↑tna:*

Your face says everything... please

4) Melisa: *Une nu:k tha↑sh kurrjo↓*

I didn't say anything hahahaha

5) Jeta (smiling): *E kan kry a po:? hahaha*

They ended it right? hahaha

6) Melisa: *=Ka dicka tvërte:t*

There is something true in it hahaha

Jeta, with a 'smile voice' (Stivers & Heritage, 2001) directs the main question to Melisa in her attempt to get some informational upshots. She clearly is exploiting the moment when Melisa is in an emotional state (laughing and teasing) to make her react "at the heat of the moment". And Melisa, surprisingly, without much effort to get convinced, even though she was sworn not to spread information (line 2), decides to open up about the case under discussion, claiming that there is something true to Jeta's suspicions (line 6), what "triggers a request for explanation" (Fatigante & Orletti, 2013).

After noticing her facial expressions, which led to assumptions for doubting (line 3), with a smile as a pre-laughing device (Hakaana, 2010), Jeta smartly asks Melisa, even after she first declared that it is prohibited to give information. Then, in line 5, Jeta joins laughter, purposely creating a humorous atmosphere, and immediately throws the question; *they ended it, right?* Thus, she partly achieves her communicative goal using (non)verbal devices, as Melisa merely admits that the relationship Jeta is interested in has ended. In this case, laughter signifies good humor, but also, "multimodal resources and practices are crucial for the collective identification, focus of attention, and even manipulation of a copresent assessable, central to the instructing action" (Mondada, 2013).

Laughing after the "critical question" gives a minimal hint to Jeta that Melisa may discover something afterward because she doesn't close it as a topic; rather, through laughter, she extends an indication she is ready to cast light on the matter. Jeta recognizes the fact that in order to gain insights into whether there is something true, she must push her friend further, as the moment is appropriate when laughter is combined with proper words. Even though there was nothing directly admitted, a glimpse of the true story is somehow confirmed.

3.1.3 Making a request or seeking advice

Among different (non)linguistic strategies for directing a request, speakers can choose one that is appropriate for certain situations or hierarchies (Flöck, 2016:1; Vöge, 2010), and whether they want to ask "on record" or "off-record." Thus, directives and such requests can be addressed implicitly or explicitly (Couper-Kuhlen & Etelämäki, 2015).

(4)

Relevant data: Emira expresses her obligation to carry out her homework, but she's too lazy, so she seeks to find help

Emira: *.Duhet me: i kry↑ detyrat po jo↑m e smut edhe e pija↓vt*

I need the homework done, but I'm sick and drunk heheh (smiles)

2) Fiona: *=Hala si: ke kry: a↑?*

You haven't finished yet?

3) Emira: *.Përderi:sa e kom ni sho↓qe si ti, ska pse: me ma ni*

As long as I have a friend like you, I don't have to worry

4) Fiona: =Po *meno:n qə du:het me tē ndi:hmu najsen...shpreso:j qə jo↑*

You mean that I must help you...hope not

5) Emira: O↑ *cfar ideje e mi↑r hahahaha↑*

Oh great idea hahahaha

6) Fiona: *Sko:m shu:m ko:h po ta shohim, spo: du me zhgənjy qet fty:r↓*

I don't have much time, but let me see I don't want to disappoint that face

The complaint in line 1 may not be viewed as a request at first. However, the continuation of conversation makes this expressed concern a *pre-telling* (Haakana, 2010) and then a hypothetical request, because Emira claims she doesn't have to worry as long as her friend (Fiona) is there to help her out (line 3). Fiona remains serious after the first line, comprised of complaint and laughter, as "these complaint turns that are laughter-infiltrated... do not receive laughter in response" (Clift, 2012). However, she immediately understands the main intention of this "complaint," which in this context is an "indirect request," and views herself as a target source for help. Nonetheless, Emira frames her turn giving clues that she must carry out her duties, even though she's sick. "Speakers who insinuate and who are called for it do two things: first, they intend their addressees to recognize that the target content is conveyed off-record. Second, when they deny having insinuated that content, they are not actually trying to convince their addressees that they were going for a different content altogether" (Oswald, 2022).

Even though Emira fails to gain a reciprocated smile, having laughter at her disposal as a "paralinguistic flavor" paves the way to continue with her substantial intention to ask a favor. In many sequential environments, by not being direct, she maintains the right to subvert the implication that she is addressing a request, which could have projected a future confrontation (Ferreira, 2021). She arranges the reactions based on Fiona's feedback, as she is aware that it's a "highly face-threatening situation" (Su, 2009). Thus, indirectness and a mixed approach give her the right to talk more freely and extensively, as some insinuations are more deniable (Mazzarella, 2021). She uses "directive actions in ways that are not reflected in the linguistic forms used" (Couper-Kuhlen & Etelämäki, 2015), because she restricts herself to directness. When Fiona mentions the presupposed aim of Emira, she acts as if it were Fiona's idea to offer help, invoking surprise for this "adequate suggestion".

Then Fiona makes "unilateral laughter that neither invites nor receives reciprocation" (Glenn & Holt, 2013), because it is meant to seek approval for the implied request. She waits for the final answer to prove if this method has succeeded. This is suggested through "expressing a playful stance" (Haakana & Sorjonen, 2011) even after Emira expresses her hopes. "But let me see" (line 6) indexes the interactional effect of laughter because Fiona doesn't want to leave her alone after showing this positive mood.

3.1.4 Making the conversational partner politer

This interactional function is noticed in a conversation between two colleagues in the workplace. Gent is sitting near the office during the lunch-break. His colleague Hyjnor doesn't expect many impolite reactions that embody anger and a desire to incite conflict.

(5)

Relevant data: Gent is feeling sad, due to some personal problems and this mood reflects on responses he gives to his colleague, Hyjnor

1) Gent: *cfar dite e zy:mt↓*

What a gloomy day

(.)

2) Hyjnor: *So:sht qa:q ke:q↓*

Not so bad

3) Gent: A *po bo:n hajgare a↑ mu pom shti:n ndepresio:n*

Are you kidding (.) makes me dive into depression just like our boss



4) Hyjnori: O:sht ma romanti:ke sikur u:ne kur e kom taku Gre:sën↑ hahaha (.) bile po:m doket kjo ka lidhje edhe me dashni:n to:nde hahaha

It's more romantic, though, as when I met Gresa and she rejected me hahahaha, that's something also tied to your love hahahaha

5) Gent: a pe don ni boks a↑

Do you want a punch or something?

6) H: Jo veç da:shta edhe ti: me ke:sh, edhe mu gëzu që i kemi humb shanset me ato

No I just want you to join my laughter and be glad we lost the chance with those women

7) Gent (smiling): Mfal sho:ku jem kom pro:bleme perso:nale e po: shfry:hna te ti

Sorry my friend I have personal problems and I'm venting on you

It's obvious that Gent isn't feeling well because he describes the day as "gloomy." Hyjnori attempts to highlight its good aspects by referring to it as romantic and drawing comparisons with Gent's "love" in an attempt to tie it to a bygone era of happiness. However, Hyjnori's intent to check out his reaction to certain presumably entertaining topics through laughter, doesn't change Gent's way of responding, as he still has a "nonchalant stance" (Haakana & Sorjonen, 2011). In such instances, laughter may be viewed as inappropriate, as the smiley face is unilateral, and these are "instances of laughter that do not receive laughter in response" (Clift, 2012), which are considered violations (Sacks, 1992) and "problematic cases" (Haakana, 2002).

Even after several negative feedbacks, e.g. threatening with a punch (line 5), he is unwavering in his purpose of shifting Gent's mood, e.g. by claiming directly he aims to fix the overall atmosphere by "recycling the previously abandoned topic" (Mondada, 2012) (line 6). As a result, he makes him produce a positive or polite reaction, as laughing is considered an invitation to get closer (Haakana, 2002), although "laughing should be a 'together' activity (Sacks, 1992; Haakana, 2002).

We can see that in many circumstances, laughter is a "tightly ordered activity, rather than something that occurs at random" (Osvaldsson, 2000). It is obvious that Hyjnori's laugh does not come out as a joke or his individual reaction, rather it aims to display willingness to make Gent politer and change his negative approach of angeriness. By laughing at his own turns, "the speaker declares or affirms that his or her utterance should not be taken seriously and in so doing addresses the listener in a manner that signifies a preference for solidarity" (McLachlan 2022). Thus, it is solo laughter, not a shared one (Glenn, 2003). However, he partly achieves his main conversation goal by making Gent's turn "at least as smileable" (Haakana, 2002) after continuous efforts to shift his friend's mood.

3.1.5 Turning serious occasions into humorous situations

Just because the issue is not grounded in humor doesn't mean the situation cannot be turned around. We noticed instances that aim to cause funny moments after a too serious or sad discourse about illnesses, unfortunate losses, etc. These occurrences sometimes cause sadness in participants' moods, and the orientation towards the 'positive vibes' can be accomplished after laughter is involved. We can assume that this is not planned humor (Perlmutter, 2000), but rather interactional humor (Jensen, 2018), which stems from the conversation flow and is embodied naturally (Samermit & Gibbs, 2016).

(6)

Relevant data: Leonita is worried about her 50-year-old colleague, who according to her, has anxiety disorders

Leonita: Merre: me me:n kolegia jem 50-vjeçare thot që tutet me ecë ve:të↑

Imagine my 50-year-old colleague saying she is scared walking alone and has anxiety problems

2) Gerta: Hmmm pse:↑

Hmm why

3) Leonita: Spe di: saktësi:sht, po mendëri:sht sosht mi:r ka ankth

I don't know exactly, but she is mentally unable and has anxiety

4) Leonita: .Më shti:n me qajt kur e meno:j nçfa:rë giendje është

It makes me cry when I think of her current state

5) Gerta: *Meno:j që djemt e ngu:cin hahaha*↑

I think the boys tease her hahaha

6) Leonita: *Çka*↑ *hahaha*

What? hahaha

7) Gerta: *Qsht e vërte:t se: di:sa nje:rëz ka:në iluzio:ne*

It's true that some people have illusions

8) Leonita: *Ma ndre:qe di:tën*

You made my day

Leonita is telling a sad story about her older colleague at work, who has anxiety disorders and struggles to walk alone on the streets. However, Gerta after showing a slight interest on her health, decides to take an endeavor to orient the “mood of the story” in another direction. She makes fun of the elderly colleague, because wants to reduce the level of seriousness in which Leonita has got her discourse in. Despite Leonita’s surprise at this uncommon response, she joins Gerta’s laughter, as she is unable to resist (Jefferson, 2004), and then, by laughing, inadvertently, she also makes fun of her colleague, whom she once was expressing remorse for, because laughter shows affiliation and alignment (Vöge, 2010), and also implies a similar attitude of conversants (Haakana, 2010).

Thus, unusual responses (like Gerta’s) tend to cause laughter, which derives more from unexpected feedback and whether the conversant is open-minded enough or feels unbothered to make fun of sad occurrences. In our case, Gerta’s goal was successfully achieved, because Leonita fully complied with her intention to turn the story into a laughable one.

It implies that the humor is involved not to highlight the talent of the speaker as a comedian but to shift attention from negative viewpoints, discover something or increase closeness with certain persons. Also, many feelings of indignation can be sorted out. Whenever it intersects, it always gives many hidden messages without anything being verbalized.

3.2. Discussion

Men and women may not differ too much in frequency of laughter on a daily basis (Martin & Kuiper, 1999), yet, they do vary in terms of its beginning and progression. It must be emphasized that there is a kind of violation of conventional expectations if one initiates laughter but the other side is not doing the same (Sacks, 1992; Mulkay, 1988). This occurs when the intended laugh fails to fulfill its purpose and recipients don’t view certain content as funny. For instance, a laughter initiated by a female is not always joined (Jefferson, 2004:119). Females provide more listener laughter talking to males (Provine, 1993) or when they are in lower status, while less laughter when talking with other females with equal status (McLachlan, 2023). The intentional listener laughter underscores the tendency for agreement, approvement and also empathizing with the speaker.

The laughter of females was shown to be linked to the likeability toward the male they are talking with. “When females do not seek intimacy, they will not defer to males by laughing at their laughables. Such laughter would be construed as a preference for solidarity, albeit a weak one, which also offers an opportunity for male speakers to join in” (McLachlan, 2022). These findings further demonstrate laughter’s close relation to other social factors, except for what is said.

The pragmatic functions explained above were highly dependent on the gender of the interlocutor, whether they belonged to the same gender as the speaker or not.

Table 1 Means of implied pragmatic functions in same and different gendered conversations

Pragmatic function/ Type of conversation	Means	Standard deviation
Same-gendered <i>Eliciting secret</i>	22	13.43503



	Different-gendered	3	
	Total	12.5	
<i>Flirting</i>	Same-gendered	0	7.77817
	Different-gendered	11	
	Total	5.5	
<i>Implying the truth</i>	Same-gendered	6	1.41421
	Different-gendered	8	
	Total	7	
<i>Requesting favors</i>	Same-gendered	14	6.36396
	Different-gendered	5	
	Total	9.5	
<i>Make the addressee politer</i>	Same-gendered	2	7.77817
	Different-gendered	13	
	Total	7.5	

Same-gendered conversations were focused far more on eliciting secrets from their counterpart than, e.g., making the addressee politer, which was more characteristic of different-gendered conversations. Conversations between people of different genders were also more sympathetic to one another, frequently attempting to lift the spirits of the other speaker, as it is shown. These talks were more likely to include some flirting laughter, which later constituted a closer relationship, and more personal topics discussed. Males who were looking to throw jokes and make females laugh succeeded most of the time. It might be the case that younger women tend to laugh more often, while men who engage in laughter display more dominance (Martin & Kuiper, 1999).

We were able to discern several distinguishing aspects of laughter rounds from informants' verbal exchanges, largely based on the respondents' gender. In many cases, "people might not notice every laugh they utter" (Vettin & Todt, 2004). Naturally, because these were spontaneous discussions, they had no idea how often they ended up laughing alone, how often they filled the silence with laughter, or how often they started the conversation with laughter but didn't get the same reaction. In our study, the number of times when the laughter was initiated, followed, and one-sided was counted separately for male and female respondents. Considering jointly the number of times when the laughter was initiated, followed, or one-sided across two genders, after conducting MANOVA, we found that there was a significant difference between males and females in these three variables: $F(3,36)=65.6$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2=0.84$.

A separated ANOVA showed significant difference in initiating laughter $F(1,38)=48.03$, $p=0.001$, $\eta^2=0.55$, in following laughter $F(1,38)=139.1$ $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2=0.78$ and one-sided laughter $F(1,38)=9.6$, $p < 0.04$, $\eta^2=0.2$ in males and females' conversational turns.

The statistics suggest that women were more likely to start laughter rounds or laugh out on their own compared to men. It means that laughter can display a speaker's stance towards his/her own turn (Holt, 2013:72) and in this case we have a "solitary speaker laughter" (McLachlan, 2022). Its distribution is able to define the roles. This reveals a lot about gender norms, which, except in other linguistic systems, are also represented in this nonverbal cue.

4. Conclusion

Through some daily interactions between youngsters, we proved that many phrases that came after laughter brought about certain interactional effects, which were classified according to the implied intention shown in the response of the conversational partner and then the speaker's reaction to it. In all the diverse contexts that we considered, it was shown that laughter projects some unplanned reactions (mostly in a positive sense) or speeds up the progress of "revealing

some secret information" or if a relationship may go further, get more established or entirely repaired.

When there was only one person laughing, the following turns included obvious indications of shared interest to delve more into topics that piqued the speaker's attention. Therefore, it is proved that laughter's functions may range from pleasant to social and pragmatic (Mazzocconi & Ginzburg, 2020). Its transformative effect was demonstrated also when it was used unilaterally (McLachlan, 2022), whether to "distract" another person from troubling thoughts or to lift someone's spirits. In such circumstances it generally served as a strategy for "mitigating FTA-s" (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025).

We observed that a variety of linguistic tools—specific words or phrases—when combined with paralinguistic modalities—smiles, winks, laughing, mimics, etc.—have the ability to "move things"—that is, alter situations or people's relationships. Thus, the speaker coordinates potential resources such as smiling and laughing to fulfill many interactional roles. Based on the pragmatic functions shown in our conversations, we noticed that laughing is a very important form of exchange within interaction (Aboh & Ladegaard, 2025).

Among the highlighted functions, we summarized the main implicated characteristics of the effects the laughter brings about:

a) Laughter gets interwoven to elicit certain signals e.g., whether the suspicion of one speaker has some truth in it, or not. Many times, the other speaker might respond non-verbally, but that's plenty for the hearer to narrow down the possibilities about the truth of the story being told.

b) Laughter is also a green flag to build something serious from a romantic perspective. This was shown in excerpt (2) when Elona accepts the invitation to go out after laughter is included within the conversation. The interactional effect is huge

Of course, laughter is associated with 'a good time', increasing well-being or 'bonding social experience' (Lyle, 2023). However, in conclusion, we can reiterate that laughter is often mobilized to achieve other purposes except inciting funny situations. The results show that laughter also has many affective roles in communication (Trouvain & Truong, 2017), which were demonstrated in pragmatic functions of flirting, becoming closer etc. Its complexity and functions extend beyond just being a sign of joy or having "*humor competence*" (Ginzburg et al., 2020). It plays a deeply ingrained role in social interactions, conveying happy emotions, discomfort, inferior status, anxiety, and more. It turned out that, in a way, laughter does have an indirect propositional content that stems from *eventive sources* (Ginzburg et al., 2020:7), as the hearer many times can dissect its meaning while relating it to external circumstances. However, the question of whether it belongs in grammar is up for debate (Ginzburg et al., 2020).

In summary, multimodal resources such as "gesture, gaze, facial expressions, body postures, body movements, and also prosody, lexis, and grammar" (Mondada, 2016; Holt, 2011) play a pivotal role in bringing a vivid nature to communication and inevitably strengthen or weaken bonds between speakers. They reflect the diverse and intertwined nature of communication and, although they remain part of nonverbal communication, along with linguistic choices, are necessary for maintaining interrelationships. This study opens up significant discussions about the complexity of dissecting the hidden messages that lie behind a very common nonverbal cue such as laughter.

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