

# LAUGHING WHEN NOTHING'S FUNNY: THE PRAGMATIC USE OF COPING LAUGHTER IN THE NEGOTIATION OF CONVERSATIONAL DISAGREEMENT<sup>1</sup>

Shawn Warner-Garcia

## Abstract

Laughter is primarily a social phenomenon and used as a resource for managing social relationships and identities. While it is often unplanned and uncensored, laughter is also strategically produced at particular moments to accomplish particular goals in interaction. In this article, I examine the ways in which laughter – specifically, what I call *coping laughter* – is utilized to manage the face-threatening relational aspects of disagreements rather than to deal with the actual content of disputes. The four specific functions of coping laughter that I analyze are (1) face-threat mitigation, (2) face-loss concealment, (3) serious-to-nonserious frame switch, and (4) topic transition facilitation. Which of these functions are accomplished varies depending on several contextual factors, including who initiates the laughter, how other participants respond to the laughter, and the overarching context and participant roles at play in the interaction. I discuss each of these influencing factors and the associated interactional functions of coping laughter in relation to the data I analyze. I argue that coping laughter is an efficient and effective strategy for dealing with the interactional trouble caused by a disagreement without dealing with its content.

**Keywords:** Laughter; Interpersonal; Context; Disagreement; Face; Framing.

He is not always at ease who laughs. – Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (1472)

Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand. – Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916)

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *Social functions of laughter*

Laughter is a peculiar phenomenon that many scholars believe predates both humor and speech in humans (Provine 2000). In addition to being both psychological and biological, laughter is also primarily a social phenomenon. Through precise coordination with speech and other interactional activities, participants use laughter as a resource for managing social relationships and identities (Glenn 2003). Laughter is

---

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Mary Bucholtz, Clay Butler, John Du Bois, Patience Epps, and Lars Hinrichs for their invaluable feedback and support. Any errors are, of course, my own.

often unplanned and uncensored, thus providing powerful insight into the nature of social life and the complex ways that participants negotiate myriad social situations. However, laughter is also strategically produced at particular moments to accomplish particular goals in interaction (Glenn 2003).

Though laughter may often co-occur with instances of humor, many scholars have shown that the two are in fact discrete entities and are functionally distinct in interaction (e.g. Jefferson 1984; Provine 2000; Chafe 2007). However, laughter's association with the humorous may be strategically mobilized in interaction in order to import its positive affective connotations. Nonetheless, laughter and humor attend to different levels of the interaction and thus must not be conflated. As I argue in my analysis, laughter is used to manage the relational level of the interaction but does not necessarily attend to the content level. In particular, I examine the ways in which laughter is utilized to manage the face-threatening relational aspects of disagreements rather than to deal with the actual content of disputes.

## **1.2. Factors influencing laughter functions**

Because laughter attends to the social and relational levels of the interaction, its functions may be quite varied. In fact, participants may mobilize laughter to pursue such diverse goals as affiliation, derision, intimacy, or manipulation. It is important, therefore, to look at the factors that may influence the social functions that laughter accomplishes. Moreover, many different types of social actions may be read as laughter-orienting – for example, laughter pulses, smiling, and exhalations may all be interpreted as laughter activities. These actions must also be accounted for in understanding the social functions of laughter.

Several scholars have noted the importance of determining where laughter occurs in relation to other laughter in analyzing its social functions (Jefferson 1979; Glenn 1983, 2003). For example, Glenn (2003) notes the difference between laughing at, laughing with, and laughing along. These distinctions home in on the different functions laughter may accomplish depending on several factors, including who laughs first, what the laughter is directed at, and whether others join in with shared laughter. While Glenn looks specifically at instances of joking and teasing (which are constructed as laughable), here I analyze how the use of laughter in response to disagreement is unique in that it does not respond to something previously constructed as laughable but rather recasts a prior action as laughable. However, Glenn's distinction between the social functions of initiator vs. recipient laughter are useful in determining how participants use laughter in different ways in response to disagreement. In my data, I refer to *initiator laughter* as that which is first produced by the person who is the instigator of a prior face-threatening act. What I call *respondent laughter*, on the other hand, is that which is first produced by the person who is the target of a prior face-threatening act. These different types of laughter may produce different interactional consequences and accomplish different interactional functions, as I will discuss in more detail below.

Who initiates the laughter following a disagreement is only part of the picture. Whether and who responds to the first incidence of laughter is also important in determining which social functions laughter may accomplish. Shared laughter, particularly following an impropriety such as a disagreement, can often indicate or invite intimacy among participants (cf. Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977; Coates 2007). An impropriety thus responded to with shared laughter can communicate that

any face threat that had occurred has been mitigated or managed. However, if laughter is not subsequently shared – or at least not shared by the people most centrally involved in the disagreement – then the face threat has the potential to remain bald and on-record or possibly even escalate.

The formality of the interactional context may also play a role in promoting certain functions of laughter while constraining others. In such formal or institutional contexts, participants may orient to the expectations placed on themselves and others due to certain roles or frames (Glenn 2003). In some cases, participants may use laughter to highlight the flexible nature of the institutional context and framing (Markaki et al. 2010), while in other cases, laughter may be used to re-inscribe existing participant roles with their implied power differentials (Glenn 2010). In the data analyzed below, I argue that laughter may be used in similar ways in both formal and informal contexts but that the interactional functions that laughter accomplishes may be constrained by more institutional settings.

### **1.3. *Strategic ambiguity of laughter***

Given the wide variability of laughter in both form and function, it is no wonder that its use in interaction is highly contextually dependent. In response to interactionally risky incidents such as teasing, improprieties, or disagreement (as in the data presented here), laughter may act as a strategically ambiguous response to something not necessarily constructed as laughable but subsequently treated as such (Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1977; Glenn 2003). Thus participants may use laughter to be intentionally equivocal and to strike a midpoint between disengagement and escalation.

## **2. Theoretical orientations**

### **2.1. *Facework and framing***

The concepts of facework and framing are helpful for understanding how and why participants manage conversational disagreement through laughter. Facework, initially developed by Goffman (1967), refers to the ways that participants negotiate perceptions of themselves and others in interaction. Building on Goffman, Brown and Levinson (1987) interpret facework as a system of politeness and use the term *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) to describe speech acts that inherently threaten the face wants of either the addressee or the speaker. However, as many scholars have noted, this theory is problematic because it assumes that facework and face threats can be judged in an absolute way apart from the interaction itself (Mills 2003, Spencer-Oatey 2005; Locher and Watts 2005; O'Driscoll 2007). FTAs locate the face threat within the individual rather than within the interaction, where it is oriented to and interpreted by other participants. Conversational disagreements such as those analyzed in this article are discursive and co-constructed, and they are a product of the interaction rather than any single action by a participant. I therefore use the term *escalation point* instead of FTA to describe places in the disagreement that are oriented to as particularly face-threatening by the participants. At the same time, I retain Goffman's concept of facework, which gives insight into the interactional motivations of using laughter to cope with disagreement. As the data in this article show, using laughter at the escalation point of a disagreement is an effective way to mitigate or conceal a loss of face.

The concept of framing (Bateson 1954; Goffman 1974, 1981) is also important in understanding how laughter is used to cope with interactional disagreement. Frames are participants' expectations about the kind of activity they are involved in and what sorts of behaviors and interactions are appropriate in that context. While frames influence the shape of discourse and participants' interpretations of the world around them (Blackwell 2003), they are also flexible and are continually transformed and co-constructed by participants. In the data below, when a disagreement reaches an escalation point, a serious frame is thereby created that participants orient to as uncomfortable and undesirable. By laughing, one or more participants enact a shift from the serious frame toward a more nonserious and harmonious frame.

## ***2.2. Laughter, humor, and disagreement***

Many scholars have studied how the conjunction of laughter and humor may be used to manage difficult interactional situations (e.g. Chapman and Foot 1996; Adelsward and Oberg 1998; Norrick and Spitz 2008). However, the distinction between laughter and humor becomes clear when considering how laughter and humor deal with disagreement in different ways. On the one hand, humor comments directly on the content of the disagreement while also reframing the content as less serious. Laughter, on the other hand, enacts a transformation of the situational framing but does not directly deal with the content of the disagreement itself. In particular, laughter acts as a sort of safety valve that allows participants the opportunity to reframe an escalating disagreement as laughable rather than serious (cf. Glenn 1989, 1992). As Chafe points out, "The feeling of nonseriousness often moderates the effect of something that would be difficult or unpleasant to cope with if it were accepted in full seriousness" (2007: 12). In other words, laughter is invoked in potentially serious situations to take a nonserious stance toward other participants and the disagreement.

Many interactional scholars have noted that participants often orient to agreement as preferred and to disagreement as dispreferred in conversation (Pomerantz 1984; Sacks 1987; Holtgraves 2005). The use of laughter in response to a dispreferred disagreement, therefore, may index a shift toward a more preferred activity or orientation. The dispreferred nature of disagreements may be marked through such verbal actions as delay devices, repair initiators, and qualifications as well as nonverbal actions such as lack of eye contact, fidgeting, and stiffened posture. Moreover, the height of a disagreement – what I call the escalation point – may be marked by the coordination of such actions as raised volume, bald on-record statements, and defensive posture, thus further indicating an interactional dispreference. Laughter, in contrast, is typically a succinct strategy for reorienting toward a more preferred framing of the interaction.

## **3. Methodology and data description**

The data analyzed in this article come from five different video recording events collected between 2005 and 2007. Each recording features 4 to 11 college-age participants and is 45 to 60 minutes long. Pseudonyms are used in place of real names. Each recording is referred to below by the year in which it was collected and an appropriate one-word descriptor. The data segments are transcribed using a combination

of conventions from Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) and Du Bois (2010), summarized in the Appendix.

This article utilizes methods from Conversation Analysis (Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Heritage 1984; Sacks 1987; Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998; ten Have 1999) as well as other approaches to discourse analysis (Potter 1997; Wood and Kroger 2000; Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton 2003). In accordance with Conversation Analysis, the identification and description of sequences of disagreement and related laughter in the data set was carried out with attention to participants' orientation to these phenomena as salient, dispreferred, and warranting additional facework. My analysis also takes account of the ways that participants use laughter as a discursive resource to shape identities, relationships, and interactions. The analysis of pragmatic uses of laughter in disagreement sequences requires an understanding not just of the conversational structure that is oriented to by participants but also the interactional and social implications of such organization. In order to understand what laughter is doing, we must take into account contextual elements such as topic and participant roles and relationships. By utilizing a broader discursive approach, this article speaks to the larger question of why laughter is an effective conversational strategy in nonhumorous contexts and why participants choose to use it.

I analyze a total of five examples in order to show the variability of the uses of coping laughter based on several factors, including context formality (e.g. informal situations such as a group of friends having dinner together vs. a student organization holding an official meeting), who initiates the laughter (e.g. whether the initiator or the respondent to the FTA), and how participants respond to it (e.g. whether some, all, or no one else join in the laughter). I illustrate how each of these interactional factors may facilitate, constrain, or change the functional achievements of coping laughter.

#### **4. Data analysis**

In my analysis, I have coined the term *coping laughter* to describe laughter that is used to manage an undesirable interactional disagreement. I do not seek to make claims about speakers' intentions or internal psychological states by using the term "coping" but rather hope to reflect the observable interactional strategy of using laughter in response to disagreement. As an interactionally emergent phenomenon, coping laughter is sequentially related to the escalation point of the disagreement within which it occurs. An *escalation point* is an interactional juncture at which a disagreement reaches a heightened level of disalignment. The escalation point is often marked by participants with increased speech volume and defensive embodied actions.

I analyze four specific functions that coping laughter serves in the data examined below. These functions are (1) face-threat mitigation, (2) face-loss concealment, (3) serious-to-nonserious frame switch, and (4) topic transition facilitation. Face-threat mitigation is the act of alleviating a face threat that is in progress in the interaction. Face-loss concealment is the act of obscuring a loss of face that has already occurred. Serious-to-nonserious frame switch is the act of re-framing a potentially face-threatening action as laughable and nonthreatening. Topic transition facilitation is the act of terminating one topic – usually a problematic one – and initiating a new topic – usually a more preferable one (cf. Holt 2010). Which of these functions are accomplished varies depending on who initiates the laughter after the escalation point, how participants respond to the laughter, and the overarching institutional context and roles at play in the interaction. I discuss each of these influencing factors and the

associated interactional functions of coping laughter in more specific detail in the individual example analyses below.

#### 4.1. *Informal contexts*

The first three examples I analyze come from informal contexts – specifically, a group of roommates eating dinner together, a group of friends playing a board game, and a group of friends playing a card game. I illustrate how coping laughter functions in informal interactions based on who initiates and/or responds to the laughter.

##### 4.1.1. *Example 1: Initiator laughter*

Example 1 illustrates how the initiator of an escalation point may use coping laughter to mitigate a face threat and transform the framing of the situation. The example is taken from a recording of a group of four female roommates (Ella, Lisa, Kay, and Kim) who are sharing a meal together at their home. Lisa is telling a story about riverboats in Louisiana that cannot leave port because they are too large to turn around in the river. Once she finishes her explanation of how the boats operate, she prompts the group to respond favorably to her evaluation of the story. The group, however, reacts less than enthusiastically.

**Figure 1.** Screenshot from 2006Dinner video recording



**Example 1.** “That’d be boring” (2006Dinner, 19:30-20:06)

- |   |                                |                          |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Lisa: Do you know those boats? | <i>Lisa looks at Kay</i> |
| 2 | (0.3)                          |                          |
| 3 | Lisa: In Louisiana,            |                          |
| 4 | cuz you can’t gamble on land,  | <i>Lisa looks down</i>   |
| 5 | the--                          |                          |
| 6 | (0.7)                          |                          |

- 7 Lisa: Riverboats? *Lisa looks at Kim*
- 8 Kay: Tugboats? *Kim nods*
- 9 (0.2)
- 10 Lisa: They have a full crew? *Lisa looks at Kay*
- 11 But they can't sail 'em because they're too big to turn  
around?
- 12 .. So they just like float on land, *Lisa bounces hands*
- 13 but they have to have a full crew in order to be like,
- 14 (0.4)
- 15 Lisa: legal by law, *Lisa makes quote gesture*
- 16 or whatever?
- 17 (0.4)
- 18 Lisa: Wouldn't that be the mo:st amazing job, *Lisa looks at Kim*
- 19 to be the captain of a boat that goes nowhere?
- 20 Kim: °@@@[@][2@@@@°]
- 21 Kay: [Wait--]
- 22 [2It just sits] there on [3land?]
- 23 Ella: [3I think I'd] feel [4kind of pathetic.]
- 24 Lisa: [4No,]
- 25 it just (.) floats in like, *Lisa bounces hands*
- 26 (0.3)
- 27 Lisa: water. *Lisa looks at Kay*
- 28 (0.2)
- 29 They just can't--
- 30 Kim: In [the,]
- 31 Lisa: [S- act]ually can't [2go anywhere,]
- 32 Kim: [2dock] [3or--]
- 33 Lisa: [3cuz he can't] turn around, *Lisa motions in a circle*
- 34 it's too big.
- 35 (0.5)
- 36 Kay: That'd be boring. *Kay looks at Lisa*
- 37 (2.3) *Lisa continues eating, lifts palms, looks at Kim*
- 38 Lisa: N: do: *Lisa looks around, smiles, shifts in chair*
- 39 °I don't know.°
- 40 → Kay: @@@@[@]
- 41 Ella: [I think it'd be] very exciting Lisa [2yes.]
- 42 Lisa: [2<HI>Thank] *Lisa scans group*
- 43 you:.  
I mean it [could #. </HI>] *Ella looks at Kim, shakes head, mouths "no"*
- 44 Kim: [No lia]bility to be on a boat that doesn't go  
anywhere.

This example includes many strong displays of stance-taking (Du Bois 2007) as the participants negotiate how to respond to Lisa's story. Throughout the narrative, Kim aligns with Lisa's evaluation by nodding in understanding during the story (line 7) and laughing at its end (line 20). In addition, she helps Lisa craft an answer to Kay's clarifying question (lines 30, 32) and continues the discussion about the benefits of being the captain of a boat that goes nowhere (line 44). In contrast, Kay and Ella initially disalign with Lisa's evaluation of her story, but then later align in various ways and to varying degrees. Kay asks clarifying questions before directly responding to the

story (lines 21-22) and eventually gives a negative, dissenting opinion (line 36) which overtly disaligns with Lisa's evaluation. Ella also explicitly disaligns with Lisa (line 23), though this is not oriented to overtly by the other participants, who are engaged in follow-up explanations to the story.

Three of the participants – Lisa, Ella, and Kay – express different affective and evaluative reactions to Lisa's story. Each uses affectively loaded terms, but across a wide evaluative range from very good (“most amazing job”) to bad (“kind of pathetic” and “boring”). This difference in affective stance-taking is likely the source of the ensuing tension as well as the probable catalyst for Kay's subsequent use of coping laughter.

After Kay's blunt disalignment with Lisa's evaluation, there is a lengthy 2.3-second pause (line 37) during which Lisa continues eating, shrugs with her palms uplifted, and looks at Kim, who so far is the only person to positively align with her story via laughter. Lisa then begins to formulate a response to Kay's assessment, but does not produce fully formed words (line 38). Her embodied behavior may display discomfort as she looks around at the other participants, smiling slightly and shifting in her chair; she eventually and quietly says, “I don't know” (line 39). Kay's disaligning evaluation in line 36 is the escalation point of the disagreement and, in conjunction with Lisa's subsequent displays of discomfort, interactionally foregrounds the face threat of the disalignment. Lisa's response to Kay's negative evaluation indicates that she is not pursuing her claim in light of the fact that Kay obviously disagrees with it. It is also a way for Lisa to guard against face loss, as her opinion cannot be further attacked if she refuses to defend it any longer. Kay's coping laughter, then, is a response to the accumulation of stances for and against Lisa's story as well as Lisa's response to Kay's unmitigated negative evaluation. It softens her face-threatening remark from line 36 and invites the group to orient toward a less serious interpretation of the situation. Rather than simply being a response to immediately preceding utterances (cf. Jefferson 1984; Glenn 1992), Kay's coping laughter has scope over the entire preceding interaction, in which participants took diverging stances on Lisa's story.

After Kay's laughter, Ella and Lisa engage in playful repartee that perhaps enacts how Lisa would have liked the other participants to respond to her story. Ella, who has previously taken a disaligning stance toward Lisa's interpretation of her story, now emphatically expresses an aligning position (line 41). Likewise, Lisa's response – “Thank you” – is equally emphatic and, by acknowledging Ella's new evaluation as aligning and hence preferred, highlights and implicates the preceding disaligning responses (line 42). This example thus shows a remarkable degree of coordination and co-construction on the part of the participants. Kay's use of initiator laughter shows how finely tuned the interaction is and how much interactional work simply laughing can accomplish. Kay's coping laughter successfully reconfigures the framing of the situation so that Ella and Lisa's exchange is hearable as playfully insincere. However, this playful interlude showcases a shift in framing rather than a transformation in alignment. This fact is particularly evident in Ella's immediate nonverbal renegeing of her alignment when Lisa is not looking (line 43). Once again, it is clear that coping laughter does not deal with the content of a disagreement but rather the framing of it.

#### *4.1.2. Example 2: Respondent laughter*

Whereas in Example 1 coping laughter was initiated by the same participant who enacted the escalation point, the next example illustrates how the respondent to (who is



often the target of) an FTA may be the one to initiate coping laughter. I illustrate how respondent laughter may be used to conceal a loss of face and to facilitate a topic transition (cf. Holt 2010). There are a total of six participants in the video recording, three men (Josh, Jack, and Caleb) and three women (Molly, Sara, and Marie). Molly and Sara are roommates, Josh and Jack are brothers, and Caleb and Marie are mutual friends of the group. All of the participants know each other and consider one another friends. In Example 2, the participants are playing a board game called Cranium, which involves two competing teams (in this case, men against women) asking a series of game questions in order to advance around the game board. This example occurs near the beginning of the interaction, when the rules of the game are being discussed. Josh has just finished explaining the rules and he begins to ask the first game question to Marie. He then realizes that the decks of cards need to be turned around so that the answers are not shown to the opposing teams when the cards are drawn. Molly suggests that to remedy this problem, they can pick cards from the middle of the deck instead. When Josh does not readily accept Molly's suggestion, she reacts with sarcasm.

**Figure 2.** Screenshot from 2007Games video recording



**Example 2.** “Or never mind don’t” (2007Games, 2:40-2:58)

- |    |        |                              |                                  |
|----|--------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1  | Marie: | Oh.                          |                                  |
| 2  |        | I’m gonna go with the green. |                                  |
| 3  |        | Do I pick from the back?     | <i>Marie reaches for deck</i>    |
| 4  |        | (0.2)                        |                                  |
| 5  | Josh:  | No,                          | <i>Josh grabs card from deck</i> |
| 6  |        | Here I’ll read to you.       |                                  |
| 7  | Josh:  | [It’s like,]                 |                                  |
| 8  | Marie: | [Oh you] read to--           |                                  |
| 9  |        | (0.7)                        |                                  |
| 10 | Josh:  | U:m,                         |                                  |

11		(0.4)	<i>Jack reaches for deck</i>
12	Josh:	Actually,	
13		we should turn that,	<i>Josh reaches for deck</i>
14		around.	<i>Josh and Jack turn around decks</i>
15		(0.5)	
16	Caleb:	@@	
17		(0.3)	
18	Josh:	So that [people can't see what,]	
19	Molly:	[Well just pick from the <u>mid</u> ]dle.	
20		(0.9)	
21	Josh:	°Well that's,°	<i>Josh looks down</i>
22		(0.3)	
23		<u>okay</u> .	<i>Josh looks at Molly</i>
24		(0.3)	
25	Molly:	<SARCASM> Or <u>never</u> mind,	<i>Molly looks down, raises eyebrows</i>
26		<u>don't</u> . </SARCASM>=	<i>Josh looks at game card</i>
27	→ Josh:	=@[@@][ <sub>2</sub> @]	<i>Josh scratches ear</i>
28	Marie:	[@@]	
29	Molly:	[ <sub>2</sub> @][ <sub>3</sub> @]	<i>Molly looks at Josh</i>
30	Sara:	[ <sub>3</sub> @]@	
31	Josh:	Uh,	
32		this is a cameo,	
33		so basically what you're gonna do,	
34		uh--	
35		well I'll read it.	

Since Josh introduced the game to everybody at the beginning of the interaction, he has established himself as the rule-keeper. He continues to assert himself in this role as he introduces and then solves the problem of turning the card decks around (lines 12-14, 18). It may be for this reason that when Molly, who has not played the game before, offers an alternate solution (line 19), Josh begins to protest (line 21). The use of turn-initial *well* is often used to signal but also mitigate forthcoming disalignment (cf. Holtgraves 2005). Josh's *well*, in addition to the long pause before he begins his response (line 20), mitigates his upcoming protest and thus signals a preference for agreement (Sacks 1987). Moreover, Josh eventually abandons his protest and apparently consents to Molly's suggestion (line 23). Despite this seeming acceptance, however, Josh's initial protest and his reticent, unelaborated assent indicate that he may not actually intend to take up the suggestion. Molly's sarcastic response (lines 25-26) implies that she in fact does not believe that Josh has fully aligned with her suggestion. If she had taken his assent sincerely, there would have been no reason to produce sarcasm because her suggestion would have won out.

In this interaction, Josh and Molly assert their differing opinions about how the problem should be solved, thereby creating a disagreement. Perhaps because Josh has already come up with a solution, he appears reluctant to entertain another idea. His use of mitigation techniques such as pauses, turn-initial *well*, and even his eventual consent do not seem to adequately convince Molly that he has completely aligned with her. Rather, she orients to Josh's overall response as a rejection of her suggestion and produces a sarcastic retort. Molly's statement in lines 25-26 can be heard as sarcastic

because her words are at odds with her tone and her embodied behavior. What she says, “Or never mind don’t,” indicates that Josh should disregard her suggestion and do as he originally intended. But her prosody, including exaggerated pitch contour, and her embodied actions, including lack of eye contact and raised eyebrows, suggest that she is orienting to Josh’s statement as a rejection. Molly’s comment gives Josh explicit “permission” to go ahead and take care of the problem in his own way. Yet by telling him not to do what she has suggested, she retains some amount of power over the proceedings of the game and the interaction as a whole.

Molly’s sarcasm acts as a defense against Josh’s rejection of her suggestion, but it also makes the disagreement between them explicit. Josh delays the disagreement with *well* and may even attempt to avoid it altogether by ostensibly acquiescing, but Molly’s sarcastic comment escalates the disagreement and brings it to the forefront of the interaction. Josh responds to Molly’s escalation point with laughter, and several of the other participants, including Molly, join in (lines 27-30). After laughing, Josh immediately begins to ask Marie the game question with no further comment on or action toward the disagreement over the decks of cards (lines 31-35). As the respondent to the escalation point, Josh uses coping laughter to downplay the fact that Molly’s escalation of the disagreement has created a threat to his face. Laughing also allows him to avoid answering Molly’s sarcasm with an argument, an account, or perhaps more sarcasm. His laughter shows that, at least on the surface, he is not offended by Molly’s sarcasm, and thus de-escalates the disagreement between them.

#### *4.1.3. Example 3: Initiator laughter and respondent laughter*

Example 3 shows how two types of coping laughter (initiator and respondent) may be used to accomplish all four functions within a relatively short span of time. This example is taken from a video recording of a different gathering of the same friends as in Example 2; however, another participant, Anne, replaces Marie as the third woman in the group. The rest of the participants remain the same. Throughout the video recording, the participants are playing a card game called Phase Ten which consists of consecutive rounds in which players attempt to get certain combinations of cards. Molly and Sara are the only members of the group who have played the game before, and after the rules have been discussed, Molly suggests a practice round. During the practice round, a disagreement arises among the three women over the rules of the game. Anne realizes that she could have played her cards (the “it” referred to in line 2 below) during her previous turn but did not know she was supposed to do so. She briefly discusses this misunderstanding with Sara and attempts to lay down her cards even though her turn has passed. But when she attempts to do so, Molly corrects her, telling her that she must wait until her next turn. Sara defends Anne by claiming that Anne did not know the rules and should therefore be allowed to lay down her cards.

**Figure 3.** Screenshot from 2007Cards video recording**Example 3.** “She needs to wait” (2007Cards, 3:49-4:07)

- |      |             |   |                                       |
|------|-------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1    | Sara→Anne:  | Yes.  |                                       |
| 2    |             | Did you have it?  |                                       |
| 3    |             | (0.5)   |                                       |
| 4    | Anne:       | I ha:ve,  |                                       |
| 5    |             | (0.6)   | <i>Anne lays down cards</i>           |
| 6    | Sara→Molly: | She had it.   | <i>Sara points at Anne</i>            |
| 7    |             | She didn't know. @  |                                       |
| 8    | Anne:       | No I know [I ha:ve,]  |                                       |
| 9    | Molly→Anne: | [Oh no_no_no,]  | <i>Molly makes scooping gesture</i>   |
| 10   |             | Keep it up.   |                                       |
| 11   | Anne:       | No I do °have [it.°]  |                                       |
| 12   | Molly:      | [No keep] your hand--   | <i>Molly repeats scooping gesture</i> |
| 13   |             | Keep it up,   | <i>Molly points at Anne's cards</i>   |
| 14   |             | You can't do it 'til your next round.   | <i>Anne picks up her cards</i>        |
| 15   | Sara→Molly: | Well she didn't know.   | <i>Sara gestures to Anne</i>          |
| 16   |             | She had it last [time.]   |                                       |
| 17   | Molly→Sara: | [I--]   |                                       |
| 18   |             | .. well that's okay,  | <i>Sara looks down</i>                |
| 19   |             | but she [needs to <HI> wait. </HI>]   | <i>Molly gestures emphatically</i>    |
| 20   | Sara:       | [I'm just--]  | <i>Sara shakes head</i>               |
| 21   |             | um,   | <i>Sara writes on score card</i>      |
| 22 → | Molly:      | @[@@@]  |                                       |
| 23   | Anne:       | [@@@@]  |                                       |
| 24   | Josh:       | [ <sub>2</sub> (WHISTLE)]   | <i>Josh looks at Jack</i>             |
| 25   | Caleb:      | [ <sub>2</sub> <☺> Trust me,]   |                                       |
| 26   |             | [ <sub>3</sub> nothing's going_to hap][ <sub>4</sub> pen between here and there.<br></☺>] |                                       |
| 27   | Molly→Sara: | [ <sub>3</sub> <HI> <☺> It's the rules. </☺> </HI> @@@]                                   |                                       |

- 28 Jack: [4I'm glad this is just the pra]ctice  
round.
- 29 → Sara→Molly: °Well she [5didn't°] kno:w. @@ *Sara lifts up palms*
- 30 Molly: [5@@]
- 31 Molly→Sara: I'm skipping you. @@ *Molly looks at Sara*
- 32 Jack→Sara: How do I play off of yours. *Molly lays down card*
- 33 Sara: You.,
- 34 Molly: You have to wait until you have your set.

This incident happens near the beginning of the card game, during what has been designated a practice round. The practice round is done in order to acquaint Anne, Caleb, Jack, and Josh with the rules of the card game. The example reveals that Molly and Sara have different ideas of how the practice round should go. Molly tries to make everyone learn the rules of the game by enforcing them; she repeatedly tells Anne not to lay down her cards because it is against the rules (lines 9-10 and 12-14). On the other hand, Sara tries to make Anne feel included instead of punished for not knowing the rules; she provides an account of Anne's actions (line 6-7) as well as an appeal to Molly (line 15-16), both of which indicate that an exception to the rules should be made for Anne because it is her first time playing.

This difference of opinions over how or whether to enforce the rules is the source of the disagreement between Molly and Sara. The back-and-forth of Sara's appeals and Molly's insistence on the rules intensifies the disagreement, and Molly initiates the escalation point of the disagreement in lines 17-19. The two participants' embodied actions also indicate that this point in the disagreement is particularly confrontational: Molly raises the pitch of her voice and gestures emphatically (line 19), and Sara casts her gaze down (line 18), shakes her head (line 20), and begins to write on the score card (line 21). While Molly intensifies her argument, Sara disengages through both minimal verbal response and embodied action.

Immediately after the escalation point, Molly produces coping laughter (line 22). While nothing preceding the laughter is laughable, what occurs afterward indicates that Molly's laughter has somehow transformed the situation in such a way that allows for the other participants to light-heartedly respond to the disagreement. Anne immediately aligns herself with Molly's laughter by joining in just one pulse after Molly has begun to laugh (line 23). This may be her way of conceding the argument to Molly; it may also signal relief that the disagreement has begun to de-escalate.

All of the men in the group, who have been silent so far during this disagreement episode, now chime in in various ways. The first to contribute is Josh, who looks at Jack and whistles (line 24). Josh's whistle is an acknowledgement that the disagreement has escalated, and it also distances him from the situation by disaligning with both Molly and Sara. Additionally, Josh's directing of his whistle at Jack invites his brother to share in his own disaligned evaluation of the disagreement. During Josh's whistle, Caleb begins to reassure Anne that she will get to lay her cards down on her next turn (lines 25-26). Caleb thus aligns himself with Anne's predicament, while not necessarily aligning himself with either Molly or Sara in relation to the disagreement. Jack in turn expresses his relief that they are only doing a practice round (line 28). This move aligns with Josh's whistle, as it downplays the seriousness of the disagreement by reminding everyone that the practice round has fewer gameplay consequences than a real round.

In sum, Molly's coping laughter enacts a serious-to-nonserious frame switch by reinterpreting the preceding disagreement as laughable. Subsequently, this nonserious frame is reiterated and elaborated by the other participants as they construct playful or downgrading responses. Molly's laughter also serves to mitigate the face threat to Sara

created by Molly's escalation point. These two functions of initiator laughter are interconnected; the success of both depends on what happens after the coping laughter occurs. That is, do the other participants take up the new nonserious frame, and does the other party in the disagreement indicate that the threat to their face has been mitigated? In this case, the answer to both questions is yes.

In the midst of the nonserious responses from the rest of the group, Molly continues to assert her position as rule-keeper and restates her argument (line 27). However, she does so in a very different fashion than in the preceding disagreement. Instead of repeatedly expressing what Anne cannot do, as before, Molly now focuses on the reason why this is the case. By simply stating "It's the rules" in a higher-pitched smiling voice, she is citing the objectivity of the game rules rather than her subjective opinion as the main reason why Anne cannot lay her cards down. Moreover, her laughter at the end of her statement continues the nonserious frame that her initial coping laughter introduced. While she continues to stand her ground, she does so in a more mitigated and playful way, furthering the transformed framing of the situation.

Sara responds one last time to Molly's continued assertion of the rules, though like Molly in a different manner than before (line 29). While Sara's words exactly match her argument in line 15 ("well she didn't know"), she reproduces this argument in a quieter tone and with laughter at the end. During Sara's statement, Molly overlaps with continued laughter from her previous turn (line 30). Sara's more muted response backs down from her argument while her laughter continues the new nonserious framing.

Sara's laughter also accomplishes the functions of respondent laughter. Like Molly's laughter in line 22, Sara's laughter is a type of coping laughter, with an important distinction. While Molly's laughter copes with the face threat of the disagreement by reassessing its level of seriousness, Sara's laughter attempts to cope with the aftermath of the disagreement and the fact that it actually did cause a loss of face for her. Her laughter minimizes her face loss by conforming to the nonserious frame that is introduced by Molly's laughter and maintained by the males of the group. Additionally, Sara's laughter serves as a sufficient response to the escalated disagreement and allows the group to transition to a new topic (lines 32-34).

This excerpt shows how both initiator laughter and respondent laughter may be used to deal with an escalated disagreement. Significantly, laughter does not deal with the content of the disagreement, which is seen in the fact that Molly and Sara continue to assert their positions even during and after the occurrence of coping laughter. Rather, coping laughter deals with the framing of the disagreement and allows the participants to deal with the face threat that is created by the escalation point.

#### **4.2. *Formal contexts***

The previous three examples looked at participants' use of coping laughter in informal settings where the participants had high levels of solidarity and relatively equal power statuses. The next two examples investigate how formal or institutional contexts may influence and/or constrain the use and functions of coping laughter. While Glenn (2010) has shown that laughter may be used in some formal contexts to re-inscribe institutional roles, Markaki et al (2010) argue that laughter is an emergent phenomenon and can sometimes be used to re-configure interactional roles and framings in formal settings. As I illustrate in my analysis of the examples below, laughter can be either utilized or eschewed in formal settings in order to accomplish a variety of institutional or

interpersonal goals within the interaction. Therefore, the functions that coping laughter achieves in these settings is not identical to informal settings and is highly contextually dependent.

#### 4.2.1. Example 4: Complicating initiator laughter

Example 4 is from a recording of five university students (David, Jacob, Kevin, Michael, and Tanya) and one university staff member sponsor (Daniel) who are on a diversity council that meets once a month to discuss ways to promote diversity and dialogue on campus. Each of the student members of the group are representatives from other student organizations. As the appointed group leader and only staff member, Daniel often exerts control over topics, turn-taking, and the assignment of duties. In the example below, Daniel sanctions the introduction of a non-agenda item and explicitly orients the group toward the rules of order governing their meeting structure.

**Figure 4.** Screenshot from 2005Diversity video recording



**Example 4.** “What we do with separate agenda items” (2005Diversity, 40:10-40:58)

- 1 David: And Dr. Wong?
- 2 or Wang?
- 3 Wong.
- 4 Daniel: [Wong.]
- 5 Kevin: [Wong.]
- 6 Jacob: What about Dr. Jones.
- 7 (0.4)
- 8 Danie:; What about him.
- 9 (0.8)
- 10 Jacob: Well,
- 11 you had,
- 12 brought up the idea that,
- 13 (0.2)
- 14 Jacob: maybe we would,

- 15                 we might be going under Dr. Wong?  
 16                 Under her?  
 17     Daniel:     Right.                                 *Daniel shuffles papers around*  
 18     Jacob:     Department?  
 19                 (0.7)  
 20     Jacob:     And then possibly,  
 21                 yeah,                                     *Daniel starts writing*  
 22                 I mean,  
 23                 if that falls through then,  
 24                 (2.0)  
 25     Daniel:     U:m.  
 26                 (0.3)  
 27     Daniel:     I don't know.  
 28                 And that's obviously another,  
 29                 topic,  
 30                 agenda item?  
 31                 (1.6)  
 32     Daniel:     And then what we do with separate agenda items.     *Daniel looks around at group*  
 33     Jacob:     Yeah.                                     *Daniel looks at Jacob*  
 34     Danie:;     We put them in order and,             *Daniel looks around at group*  
 35     →             @@  
 36                 finish what we're working on now,     *Daniel looks at Jacob*  
 37                 (0.7)  
 38     Daniel:     uh,                                     *Daniel looks down at table*  
 39                 (0.3)  
 40     Daniel:     seeing if we,                             *Daniel looks around at group*  
 41                 (0.4)  
 42     Daniel:     were adopting Robert's Rules,  
 43                 we would uh,  
 44                 y'know,  
 45                 entertain that,  
 46                 (0.8)  
 47     Daniel:     at the end.                             *Daniel looks at Jacob*  
 48                 But that's a g--  
 49                 That's another important question.

This example shows Daniel asserting himself in a leadership role and able to invoke conversational rules in order to manage the flow of information. When David mentions Dr. Wong, Jacob seems to take this (as well as Daniel and Kevin's participation in the topic through repairs in lines 4-5) as a transition from the previous topic of the event to a new topic of faculty advisers. Thus he offers another suggestion, Dr. Jones, to complement the suggestion of Dr. Wong (line 6). Daniel does not seem to see the relevance of Jacob's question and so asks a clarifying question (line 8). Jacob's explanation (lines 10-16) attempts to tie the relevance of Dr. Jones back to the topic of Dr. Wong, which he claims was brought up by Daniel at some earlier point in time. In lines 20-23, Jacob seems to be implicating that Dr. Jones would be the faculty adviser if Dr. Wong fell through. Daniel's interjection (line 17) in the middle of Jacob's explanation could be viewed a few different ways: As a back-channel, as a move to grab the floor, or as an encouragement for Jacob to get to the point. Jacob continues his explanation and does not orient to Daniel's interjection as a floor-grabbing move (or if he does, he doesn't relinquish the conversational floor), but he does conclude his explanation quickly, and in fact trails off before he finishes his thought. This indicates that he has possibly oriented to Daniel's interjection as a way of saying "hurry up."

Daniel delays his response to Jacob's explanation in several different ways. He waits two whole seconds after Jacob trails off before he begins speaking, begins with a prolonged "um," and then starts his answer with "I don't know" (lines 25-27). All of



these show that Daniel is orienting to what he is about to say as dispreferred: In fact, he does not pick up on the topic that Jacob has introduced, but rather tries to steer the group back to the original topic. He encourages the group to remember the appropriate actions to take with separate agenda items (line 32, 34-47) and uses inclusive deictic markers such as “we” in order to invite the group to align with his response. However, his use of “you know” (line 44) is somewhat condescending as it assumes the group needs to be reminded of its own rules and he is the one to do this. As well, the overuse of deictics such as “we” can have a patronizing effect as opposed to a mitigating effect. While Jacob seemingly agrees with Daniel by saying “yeah” in line 33, his falling intonation indicates that he may be somewhat defeated or perhaps embarrassed that his suggestion wasn’t taken up.

Up to this point, Daniel has been strongly positioning himself against the introduction of this new topic. He asks a question initially about the topic’s relevancy (line 8), interjects in the middle of Jacob’s explanation in order to encourage Jacob to get to the point (line 17), defers judgment on the topic (line 27), and reminds the group that the appropriate thing to do with separate agenda items is to put them in order and address them after the current topic has been closed (32, 34-47). His refusal to address the new topic, while perhaps falling within Robert’s Rules of Order, presents a face threat to Jacob who introduced the new topic. Daniel seems to sense this tension and produces coping laughter during the middle of his explanation. However, no one else picks up on his laughter (a few participants smile, but no one else laughs) and so he continues his explanation (line 14). While smiling can sometimes be an indicator of strong uptake of a prior laughable, it may also affiliate with the construction of a prior utterance as delicate or troublesome, by laughter and other means (cf. Haakana 2010). Daniel’s invoking of Robert’s Rules could be seen either as a way of reinforcing his explanation as authoritative, or it could be a way of distancing himself from something that is causing tension by implying that it is Robert’s Rules that is enforcing this conversational structure and not just his own opinion (cf. “It’s the rules” in Example 3). Based on the fact that Daniel produced coping laughter in line 35 as a way to mitigate the force of his explanation, it would be strange if he were to then take up a harder line by invoking Robert’s Rules as a way to bolster his explanation. Therefore, it seems more likely that the mention of Robert’s Rules is a way to further distance himself from and mitigate the force of his explanation. It is thus a reinforcement of rather than a detraction from his use of coping laughter.

This data segment could be considered a disagreement based on the misalignment not of conversational content (Daniel never disagrees that the assignment of a new faculty mentor is an important topic and in fact maintains it is “another important question” in line 49) but of conversational structure and expectations. Jacob picks up on what he sees as David’s transition to a new topic and Daniel sanctions this move as out-of-turn per the conversational structures he is assuming. However, this sanctioning move is face-threatening to Jacob and indeed the entire group and Daniel, as the initiator of the FTA, produces coping laughter in the middle of his explanation in order to mitigate the face threat.

However, as noted above, no one joins in with Daniel’s laughter nor does anyone (including Daniel) pursue a nonserious frame in the subsequent interaction; rather, they get right back to business. While shared laughter would be a good indication that the face threat has been mitigated and rapport has been restored, this does not happen here. But it can be reasonably assumed that Daniel’s laughter mitigated the face threat enough so that none of the participants retaliated against Daniel’s explanation but rather accepted it as authoritative. Thus, while the laughter may have mitigated the face

threat enough to bring it back into a "neutral zone," it likely did not restore or give any additional positive face to Jacob (or the group). On the other hand, the fact that no one elaborates within the nonserious frame makes it dubious that the laughter actually accomplishes this frame switch.

#### 4.2.2. Example 5: Blurring the lines between initiator and respondent laughter

The next example is from a recording of a larger group of 11 university students who are gathered for a weekly meeting of their undergraduate English honor society. The main participants in the following example are Karen, Susan, Kristi, Jessica, and Melanie. This example illustrates a disagreement between two participants who have different strategies about how to advertise for an event that the group is planning. Susan is a proponent for putting up flyers, while Melanie is a proponent for in-class announcements from professors. When Susan defends her opinion with a personal account, the group reacts with coping laughter. The discussion ultimately ends in a compromise and they agree to both make announcements and put up flyers.

**Figure 5.** Screenshot from 2005Sigma video recording



**Example 5.** "I don't know about you but I read the flyers" (2005Sigma, 19:58-20:34)

- |    |          |   |
|----|----------|---|
| 1  | Kristi:  | And how would we,   |
| 2  |          | like advertise that.  |
| 3  |          | Just maybe,   |
| 4  |          | ask the professors to say something?                                |
| 5  |          | (0.5)   |
| 6  | Susan:   | We could put up flyers,   |
| 7  |          | in the,   |
| 8  |          | in all the,   |
| 9  |          | rooms too.  |
| 10 | Kristi:  | Yeah that #makes #sense.  |
| 11 |          | (4.0)   |
| 12 | Melanie: | And asking the professors actually probably wouldn't be a bad idea. |
| 13 | Kristi:  | #Yeah ###   |

- 14     Melanie:    Because most people,  
15                   (0.2)  
16     Melanie:    I mean,  
17                   if you say something like that in class,  
18                   they're gonna listen to it more than,  
19                   (0.3)  
20     Kristi:     Right.  
21     Jessica:     Than if [they're just passing,]  
22     Melanie:           [reading a flyer] [<sub>2</sub>as they're passing through.]  
23     Jessica:                   [<sub>2</sub>Yeah.]  
24                   (1.1)  
25     Susan:     I don't know about you but I read the flyers.  
26                   (0.3)  
27     Susan:     So,  
28 → Group:     @@@  
29                   (0.6)  
30     Karen:     Even when they [see them like,]  
31     Susan:                   [Some people do read] [<sub>2</sub>the flyers.]  
32     Karen:   [<sub>2</sub>two months after,]  
33     Susan:     I still read them yeah.  
34     Karen:     That's #totally #normal.  
35     Jessica:     You have them like memorized.  
36     Susan:     So we can do both and catch both kinds of people.  
37                   (0.2)  
38     Kristi:     #Yeah.  
39                   (0.5)  
40     Jessica:     Okay.

This excerpt shows a difference of opinions between several of the women in the group, but mainly between Susan and Melanie. While Kristi introduces the idea of professors making announcements (lines 1-4), she also concedes that Susan's idea about flyers is good (line 10). But when Melanie picks back up on her idea of the professors, she readily agrees with her as well (line 13). From the beginning, Kristi is willing to consider both ideas as possibilities for advertising the event and not necessarily mutually exclusive. The disagreement comes when Melanie contrasts the idea of the in-class announcements with the flyers and asserts that the in-class announcements would be more effective (lines 14-18, 22). This puts the two ideas on different levels, with the in-class announcements being a better idea than the flyers. Jessica also jumps in and co-constructs a response with Melanie by emphasizing the fact that people just walk past the flyers and may not notice them (line 21). Susan seems to recognize that her idea is being disparaged and so she defends it with a personal account (line 25). Her use of the formulaic "I don't know about you but..." illustrates that she has perceived a threat to her face and allows her to disassociate herself with Melanie's point of view and realigns herself with her own. Her account personalizes her point of view and directly discredits Melanie's claim that flyers are not effective.

After this personalization of the disagreement, several if not most of the participants in the group (though it is impossible to tell which ones exactly) produce laughter. What is important is that Melanie joins in the laughter and Susan smiles as well. While the coping laughter does conceal a face threat (specifically to Melanie but also to the group as a whole), it does not provide a transition away from the disagreement; rather Susan (and Karen) continue to maintain and express their position about the flyers with more personal accounts (lines 30-34). On the other hand, the coping laughter does enact a serious-to-nonserious frame, which is elaborated by Jessica in line 35.

This excerpt is a good example of how coping laughter can address a discrepancy in framing but not a discrepancy in content. Susan and Karen continue to assert their opinion that flyers are useful, but after the coping laughter the disagreement becomes less serious (e.g. Karen's likely exaggeration that she reads the same flyers two months after they are timely, and Jessica teasing Susan/Karen that they have the flyers memorized). In the end, the content dispute is resolved by a compromise proposed by Susan that they pursue both ideas.

### 4.3. Discussion

The above analysis demonstrates the various functions of coping laughter. The four functions I have focused on are (1) face-threat mitigation, (2) face-loss concealment, (3) serious-to-nonserious frame switch, and (4) topic transition facilitation. Which of these functions are accomplished varies depending on who initiates the laughter after the escalation point, how participants respond to the laughter, and the overarching institutional context and roles at play in the interaction. Table 1 summarizes the functions of coping laughter and the relevant interactional variables in each example analyzed.

**Table 1.** Summary of coping laughter functions and interactional variables by example.

	<i>Context Type</i>	<i>Laughter Initiator</i>	<i>Coping Laughter Functions</i>			
			<i>Face-threat mitigation</i>	<i>Serious to nonserious frame switch</i>	<i>Face-threat concealment</i>	<i>Topic transition facilitation</i>
<b>Example 1</b>	Informal	FTA-initiator	✓	✓		
<b>Example 2</b>	Informal	FTA-respondent			✓	✓
<b>Example 3</b>	Informal	Both	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Example 4</b>	Formal	FTA-initiator	✓			
<b>Example 5</b>	Formal	FTA-respondent		✓	✓	

Who initiates coping laughter is often important in determining what functions it accomplishes. If the initiator of an FTA is the first to laugh, their laughter can be seen as an attempt to mitigate the prior FTA. However, if the respondent to (or target of) the FTA laughs first, their laughter can be seen as an attempt to conceal their own loss of face. Both mitigation and concealment occur through the transformation of the FTA into a laughable (even though it was not originally constructed as such). The subsequent actions following the initial laughter is also key to determining the acceptance or rejection of the framing of the FTA as laughable. While shared laughter may indicate a successful frame switch or a pivot away from the previous (delicate) topic, a lack of shared laughter may indicate that there has not been a successful reorientation away from the FTA. Finally, the formality of the interactional context can promote certain functions of laughter while constraining others. For example, designated leaders in institutional settings may be more likely to initiate laughter than non-leaders. On the other hand, group members may use laughter to reconfigure the default hierarchical group structure, but they may also refrain from using laughter to indicate a continued orientation to the serious institutional framing of the context.

It is important to note that the functions and variables explored in this paper are not exhaustive. As noted before, because laughter attends to the social levels of an interaction, it may function in quite diverse and even seemingly contradictory ways.

Thus, laughter may be used to pursue affiliation in one context but may be used to manipulate or deride in another. However, the examples I have analyzed here show that laughter is used to cope with disagreement in mainly positive ways – that is, to mitigate face threats instead of exacerbate them and to reframe delicate topics as laughable.

## **5. Conclusion**

Laughter is primarily a social phenomenon. While often spontaneous, participants nonetheless use laughter strategically to manage social relationships and to accomplish particular goals in interaction. Moreover, laughter's association with humor can be mobilized in order to import positive affect into a situation, but laughter used apart from humor manages the relational level and not necessarily the content level of an interaction. Coping laughter is thus a valuable resource for dealing with disagreement, but there are, of course, other ways that participants might deal with disagreement that would more directly address the content. For example, they could respond with more escalating statements in pursuit of an argument, thereby maintaining the face threat of the disagreement as well as their position within it. On the other hand, they could use politeness strategies to acknowledge and de-escalate the disagreement and come to a compromise on their positions. Laughter as an interactional resource is often usefully ambiguous, and in the case of coping laughter, it allows participants to mitigate the face threat of a disagreement while still ostensibly being able to maintain their positions. Coping laughter also accomplishes these things relatively quickly (i.e. in the space of a few laughter pulses) and takes up relatively little interactional space.

Moreover, the use of coping laughter demonstrates that the overarchingly important issue of the interaction is the relationships among the participants rather than the content of the dispute. By mitigating disagreements through laughter, participants display an orientation toward face-saving and harmonious interaction. They show themselves as actively choosing not to perpetuate the face threat of the disagreement and thus position themselves as amiable and agreeable. Coping laughter also casts the disagreement as nonserious rather than serious, thus not requiring participants to “incorporate such things into one's knowledge of how the world really is” (Chafe 2007: 65). This re-orientation to a disagreement as nonserious through laughter allows participants to create (or re-establish) rapport (cf. Coates 1996). In this way, coping laughter functions above all to manage the interaction on a relational level.

In calling attention to coping laughter as a nonhumorous form of laughter, this study contributes to interactional research on politeness, laughter, and conflict. While many previous studies have focused on politeness and face threats as inherent characteristics of certain utterances, I have argued that through the strategic resource of laughter, participants may transform the feeling and framing of disagreements to pursue a variety of interactional and relational goals. Thus, both the form and function of laughter is highly contextually dependent. Laughter's strategic ambiguity may be mobilized by participants to find a middle ground between disengagement from and escalation of interactionally risky incidents such as disagreements. This versatility of laughter must therefore be accounted for and incorporated into discursive studies of laughter in interaction.

## References

- Adelsward, V., and B. Oberg (1998) The function of laughter and joking in negotiation activities. *Humor* 11.4: 411-429.
- Atkinson, J., and J. Heritage (eds.) (1984) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bateson, G. (1954) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Blackwell, S. (2003) What's in a pear film narrative? Framing and the power of expectation in Spanish. *Spanish in Context* 6.2: 249-300.
- Brown, P., and S. Levinson (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chafe, W. (2007) *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The Feeling behind Laughter and Humor*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Chapman, A., and H. Foot (eds.) (1996) *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications*. Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Coates, J. (1996) *Women Talk: Conversation between Women Friends*. Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Coates, J. (2007) Talk in a play frame: More on laughter and intimacy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39: 29-49.
- Du Bois, J. (2007) The stance triangle. In R. Englebretson (ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse: Subjectivity, evaluation, interaction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 139-182.
- Du Bois, J. (2010) Representing discourse. Ms. University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Glenn, P. (1983) Initiating shared laughter in multi-party conversations. *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53: 127-149.
- Glenn, P.J. (1989) Initiating shared laughter in multi-party conversations. *Western Journal of Communication* 53.2: 127-149.
- Glenn, P. (1992) Current speaker initiation of two-party shared laughter. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 25: 139-162.
- Glenn, P.J. (2003) *Laughter in interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Glenn, P. (2010) Interviewer laughs: Shared laughter and asymmetries in employment interviews. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42.6: 1485-1498.
- Goffman, E. (1967) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1974) *Frame Analysis*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Goffman, E. (1981) *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Haakana, M. (2010). Laughter and smiling: Notes on co-occurrences. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42.6: 1499-1512.
- Heritage, J. (1984) *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Holt, E. (2010) The last laugh: Shared laughter and topic termination. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42.6: 1513-1525.
- Holtgraves, T. (2005) Social psychology, cognitive psychology, and linguistic politeness. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 73-93.
- Hutchby, I., and R. Wooffitt (1998) *Conversation Analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Jefferson, G. (1979) A technique for inviting laughter and its subsequent acceptance/declination. In G. Psathas (ed.), *Everyday language: Studies in ethnomethodology*. New York: Irvington Publishers, pp. 79-95.
- Jefferson, G. (1984) On the organization of laughter in talk about troubles. In J. Atkinson, and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 346-369.
- Jefferson, G., H. Sacks, and E. Schegloff (1977) Preliminary notes on the sequential organization of laughter. *Pragmatics Microfiche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Locher, M., and R. Watts (2005) Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 9-33.
- Markaki, V., S. Merlino, L. Mondada, and F. Oloff (2010) Laughter in professional meetings: The organization of an emergent ethnic joke. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42.6: 1526-1542.
- Mills, S. (2003) *Gender and Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norrick, N., and A. Spitz (2008) Humor as a resource for mitigating conflict in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40.10: 1661-1686.
- O'Driscoll, J. (2007) What's in an FTA? Reflections on a chance meeting with Claudine. *Journal of Politeness Research* 3: 243-268.
- Pomerantz, A. (1984) Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments. In J. Atkinson, and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 79-112.
- Potter, J. (1997) Discourse analysis. In M. Hardy, and A. Bryman (eds.), *Handbook of data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, pp. 610-623.
- Provine, R. (2000) *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. New York: Viking.
- Sacks, H. (1987) On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In G. Button, and J. Lee (eds.), *Talk and social organisation: Multilingual matters*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, pp. 54-69.
- Sacks, H., E. Schegloff, and G. Jefferson (1974) A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50: 697-735.
- Schiffrin, D., D. Tannen, and H. Hamilton (2003) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2005) (Im)Politeness, face, and perceptions of rapport: Unpackaging their bases and relationships. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 95-119.
- Ten Have, P. (1999) *Doing Conversation Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wood, L., and R. Kroger (2000) *Doing Discourse Analysis: Methods for Studying Action in Talk and Text*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

**Appendix: Transcription Conventions (based on Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Du Bois 2010)**

<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Symbol</u>
Intonation unit	{line break}
Truncated intonation unit	--
Truncated word	-
Speech overlap	[ ]
Final intonation	.
Continuing intonation	,
Appeal intonation	?
Timed pause (in seconds)	(0.0)
Micropause	..
Glottalized	%
Laughter	@
Dubious transcription	#
Latching	=
Emphatic speech	<u>Underline</u>
Elongated speech	:
Quiet speech	° °
Rapid speech	Connected_with_underscore
High-pitched voice quality	<HI>
Smile voice quality	<☺>
Nonverbal information	<i>Italics</i>