The Use of Shared Laughter for Amicably Terminating Disagreements within Romantic Relationships

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In response to escalating divorce rates, considerable research has been conducted surrounding the relationship between couple's conflict prevalence and relationship satisfaction. Research has consistently argued that conflict and related negative communication behaviours are detrimental to satisfaction levels within romantic partners (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch & McIlvane, 2010). However, this research has inadequately addressed the fine details of these disagreements and there is little understanding surrounding the communication techniques used within such conflicts. This study observed four couples for a total of over twenty hours in order to identify the key communication techniques used within disagreements. Following Jefferson transcription, the data was then analysed in terms of conversation analytic devices such as laughter or topic transition to understand how these techniques affected the conflict. Through analysis of the data, the research identified a phenomenon in using laughter to terminate conflict through de-escalating and mitigating the seriousness of the dispute, ultimately ending more positively than other conflict ending strategies. This addresses the gap in understanding the detail of conflict within romantic relationships and also contributes to the growing body of similar conversation analysis studies, which have identified the significance of laughter in terminating conflict and related topics. In addition to the wider context of research supporting the positive effects of laughter in everyday use (Garcia, 2014; Holt, 2010), this study identifies the beneficial use of laughter in the key context of disagreements.

Keywords: laughter, relationships, conflict, communication

Context

Due to increasing divorce rates, quantitative research surrounding marital satisfaction and association to divorce grew exponentially throughout the 1990s with a particular focus upon communication styles.[1] Initial quantitative studies indicated that verbal aggression is correlated to low marital satisfaction[2] and negative communication behaviours lead to increased unhappiness within romantic partners.[3] Specifically, prevalence of individual

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[1] Paul Amato and Denise Previti, "People's Reasons for Divorcing: Gender, Social Class, the Life Course, and Adjustment," *Journal of Family Issues, 24* (2001) and Paul Amato and Bruce Keith, "Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis," *Psychological Bulletin,* 110 (1991).

[2] Michael Payne and Teresa Sabourin, "Argumentative Skill Deficiency and its Relationship to Quality of Marriage," *Communication Research Reports,* 7 (1990).

[3] John Gottman, and Lowell Krokoff, "Marital Interaction and Satisfaction: A Longitudinal View," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57, 1 (1989).

destructive behaviours such as yelling or withdrawing from conflict impacted upon relationship satisfaction and was significantly predictive of divorce.[4] These particular studies identify that communication behaviours are crucial in relationship satisfaction and ultimately are predictive of long-term relationship outcomes.

Although conflict and marital satisfaction have been recurrently studied quantitatively, there are a growing number of Conversation Analysis (CA) studies which reflect the detail of conflict communication. A major focus of CA research relates to conversation closing, most commonly through the two-stage closing model. Firstly, a pre-closing sequence takes place in which a speaker's turn must not encourage another turn or be interpreted as silence[5]. This identifies that neither participant wishes to continue this conversation and is commonly seen through exchanges such as 'okay'.[6] The second stage refers to terminal exchange whereby participants ultimately close the conversation.[7] Correct interpretation of this closing sequence is vital as misinterpretation can lead to difficulties in the sequence of communication and is one of many strategies regularly employed in order to appear polite[8]. Therefore, within both everyday conversation and conflicts, the termination point is of great importance to all parties.

However, this termination sequence can also be facilitated by a variety of techniques, for example laughter. Laughing in unison is considered a specific activity and often facilitates topic termination.[9] A speaker's initial laughter generally invites reciprocal laughter, and if a recipient responds then it signals their alignment to terminating the conversation.[10] When the invitation is accepted, the shared laughter acts as the pre-closing and terminal exchange in which both parties clearly signal they are both ready to end this topic. However, it is not compulsory for a recipient to accept, and a rejection of this laughter invitation often coincides with a serious response and negative escalation.[11] Furthermore, whilst humour is predominantly positive,[12] if used inappropriately or misinterpreted as being aggressive, it has considerable negative effects and leads to further difficulties in conversation.

Alternatively, closing sequences are often markedly different within conflicts. Conflicts employ specific strategies which substitute the closing sequence and often lead to

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[4] Birditt et al, "Marital Conflict Behaviour and Implications for Divorce over 16 Years,".

[5] Emanuel Schegloff and Harvey Sacks, "Opening up closings," *Semiotica,* 8 (1973).

[6] Stuart Sigman, *The Consequentiality of Communication* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995).

[7] Schegloff and Sacks, "Opening up closings," 295.

[8] Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1987).

[9] Holt, (2010), "The Last Laugh: Shared Laughter and Topic Termination."

[10] Elizabeth Holt, "On the nature of 'laughables' : laughter as a response to overdone figurative phrases." *Pragmatics*, 21 (2011).

[11] Phillip Glenn, *Laughter in interaction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[12] Rod Martin, *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach (*Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007).

negative outcomes. The most common strategy is 'stand-off', whereby the conflict terminates with both parties maintaining position and ceasing to discuss the topic.[13] Whilst this halts further escalation, it does not successfully resolve or terminate the conflict and is considered a negative outcome. Within disagreements, participants may respond with counter arguments which serve to escalate the dispute, however sometimes laughter is for mitigation whilst allowing both participants to maintain their viewpoint.[14] Acceptance of a laughter invitation diffuses conflict, providing a chance to resolve and transition the topic in a mutually positive way.[15] Laughter appears to allow participants to successfully mitigate and terminate the disagreement without being submissive or losing face. This suggests that although research often considers laughter and closings in relation to everyday conversations[16], they also appear particularly relevant within conflict.

Building upon current literature, this particular study was conducted to identify the fine details of these disputes. This research set out to address how couples argue, specifically in relation to what underlying practices couples use to manage their disputes. Furthermore, it is apparent that while there is extensive CA literature surrounding conversation closing regarding laughter[17] and conflict[18] separately, there is little which encompasses these elements together. This study focuses upon the ways laughter is used within couple's disagreements in order to mitigate seriousness and terminate in an amicable manner.

Methodology

Data was collected from four couples, each provided with recording equipment from the Keele University Psychology Department. Couples were helped in setting up the equipment to ensure optimum placement in the room most regularly used by participants– usually the living room or kitchen. Participants were instructed to record their conversations during everyday activities such as cooking or eating dinner. Each couple was asked to record footage between four and ten hours long, with the final collated footage totaling 24 hours of naturalistic observations. Within CA, it is not unusual to use small sample sizes as the analysis does not focus on comparison between participants but only analyses the data recordings themselves.

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[13] Samuel Vuchinich, "The Sequential Organization of Closing in Verbal Family Conflict," in *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations of Arguments in Conversations* ed. by Allen Grimshaw *(*Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
[14] Warner-Garcia, "Laughing when nothing's funny".
[15] Ibid.
[16] Sacks and Schegloff, (1973), Holt (2010) & Holt (2011).
[17] Holt, (2010). & Holt, (2011).
[18] Vuchinich (1990), & Warner-Garcia, (2014).

Once footage was collected, data was transcribed as verbatim to produce a transcript including simply the words spoken by participants. Following verbatim transcription, specific extracts were selected based upon potential phenomena of interest such as disagreements, laughter, insults and terms of endearment. Overall these extracts included 62 in total and these extracts were transcribed using Jefferson transcription conventions[19] which uses symbols in order to identify details of the communication such as pitch shifting, timing of pauses, overlap and emphasis which is evidenced in the analysis section. Following Jefferson transcription, each transcript was analysed through identifying recurring patterns in the data and the actions they facilitated.

CA was the most appropriate method for this research due to its foundations in ethnomethodology and focus upon considering the details of communication.[20] Harvey Sacks, a Founding Sociologist, presented a new qualitative research approach in the 1960s, rooted in the core concept of ethnomethodology and focused on studying naturalistic everyday conversation, most often telephone calls.[21] The roots of CA suggest we share an underlying knowledge of the rules of communication, allowing us to engage with each other in a way considered socially appropriate.

In particular, CA builds upon three fundamental assumptions:

1. Talk is sequentially ordered: Specific sequences produce actions.
2. Context-shaped: Facilitating understanding from immediately preceding turns.
3. Talk as an action: All talk produces a specific desired action.

Essentially, CA aims to understand how participants take turns in conversations, and ultimately how we overcome difficulties in conversation structure.[22] From analysing these interactions, CA aims to decipher exactly what conversational devices are utilised, often referred to as features or phenomena. For example, the amount of overlap or pause between speakers,[23] or presence of laughter.[24] CA analyses the data to find these recurring phenomena in order to understand how they affect talk.

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[19] Gail Jefferson, "An exercise in the transcription and analysis of laughter," in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis Vol. 3. Discourse and Dialogue,* ed. by Teun Van Dijk (New York: Academic Press, 1985).
[20] Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt, *Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).
[21] Paul Ten Have, *Doing Conversation Analysis: A Practical Guide*. (London: SAGE Publications, 1999).
[22] Dennis Howitt, and Duncan Cramer, *Introduction to Research Methods in Psychology* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2011).
[23] Ten Have, *Doing Conversation Analysis: A Practical Guide.*
[24] Holt,(2010), "The Last Laugh".

Analysis

Through analysing the data, a recurring phenomenon was identified regarding laughter as a device for mitigation and termination within disagreements. Although there were multiple instances within the data, only three key examples are presented. The extracts below illustrate the way in which laughter can be used in closing conflicts and the impact upon termination compared to other conflict ending strategies.

Extract 1: C1.S4.E1.J1.Delivery_(16:30)

```
1      C: Don't break traditio::n
2         (.)
3      A: I always go
4         (0.3)
5      C: YE↑:AH that's why it's tradition.
6         (0.2)
7      A: It's not tradition.
8         (0.2)
9      C: Just do as your to::ld [will ya]
10  →  A:                        [AH(H)A ](H)A(H)a(h)
11        (0.3)
12  →  A:.h[h(h) no ]
13  →  C:  [.hhh(h)a](h)
```

Throughout lines 1-5, Charlotte defends that fetching the delivery is Ant's responsibility due to 'tradition'. Whilst Ant agrees he usually accepts the delivery, he does not agree this is a legitimate reason and issues a counter claim on line 7. Charlotte attempts a different tactic on line 9 by simply telling Ant to do as he's told and on line 10 Ant responds with laughter, overlapping Charlotte's previous turn. Ant's turn also encompasses a serious reaction in direct disagreement, nevertheless, this is mitigated by laughter which softens the blunt refusal. Through providing a serious reaction in conjunction with laughter, this downgrades the harshness of the response.[25] Ant may have chosen to provide a purely serious reaction to escalate the dispute, but by introducing laughter it re-frames the conflict towards a more humorous discussion.[26] In turn this allows Ant to maintain his position without further escalation of the dispute.

Furthermore, the laughter produced on lines 10 and 12 begins the pre-closing sequence by indicating willingness to terminate the conversation.[27] Charlotte does not interpret Ant's initial laughter on line 10 but correctly interprets his second laughter

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[25] Warner-Garcia, "Laughing when nothing's funny".
[26] Ibid.
[27] Holt,(2010), "The Last Laugh".

production and accepts the laughter invitation on line 13, reciprocating the humorous re-orientation and signal to terminate through shared laughter. As no further turns are produced, Charlotte's response on line 13 acts as the terminal exchange. Despite Ant's challenge, video footage shows Ant later accepting the food delivery. The laughter in this first extract re-framed the dispute and the shared laughter initiates the closing sequence. Whilst still considered a stand-off, the conflict ended in a positive manner.

Extract 2: M2.S7.E2.J1.Lukewarm tea_(11:15)

```
1    M: But it's not cold↑ coz I aven't even drank it yet
2       cause I- I was waiting for it to cool down.
3       (0.4)
4    M: And,
5       (0.2)
6  →  I: You just want the re::ally hot one cause [you=
7    M:                                            [no=
8    I:=(give me the cold one)    ]
9  →  M:= because the water in the] kettle won't be really
10       hot a.hh(h)u(h)u(h).
11       (.)
12   I: Well not now you p[ressed the side=
13 →M:                    [ a(h)u:::(h)u(h):::.hhhh=
14 →I:=(h)(h)(h)u(h)::HA(H)U(H)(h)]
15   M:=  (.)      UHHHH:(h)u(h)a::](h)
```

Throughout lines 1-4 Maureen is defensively delivering her account as to why she is giving Ian her cup of tea instead of making a new one. During Ian's response on line 6 he physically turns around to Maureen and smiley voice can be heard. Whilst smiling is a visual stimulus, smiley voice refers to a particular tone of voice where the speaker's tone is indicative of smiling and the smile can almost be heard.[28] This tone is also usually a pre-cursor to laughter and demonstrates the speaker's orientation to a humorous context,[29] although on line 7 Maureen has not interpreted this orientation and instead responds with a serious and defensive response. Following completion of her account, Maureen identifies Ian's re-orientation and responds with laughter in order to continue the mitigation. This immediately changes the dispute and de-escalates the seriousness of the disagreement.

Furthermore, this sequence is reversed when Maureen responds on line 13 to Ian's more serious response with her own laughter. Maureen's reaction acts as the first pre-closing sequence to which Ian accepts and laughs heartily to complete the pre-closing.

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[28] Markku Haakana, "Laughter in Medical Interaction: From Quantification to Analysis, and back," *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6 (2002).

[29] Markku Haakana,"Laughter and Smiling: Notes on co-occurrences," *Journal of Pragmatics, 45* (2010).

Once Ian begins to laugh in unison, Maureen's laughter then 'floods out' much louder and heartily[30], as does Ian's laughter. As no further turns are produced, again the acceptance of the laughter invitation acts as the terminal exchange and the shared laughter effectively closes the dispute. This shared laughter continues to re-frame the conflict as humorous and allows for effective termination without either participant deferring their stance in the dispute. Therefore, similar to the previous extract, the laughter has not only been used directly to mitigate the conflict, but also in order to close the disagreement.

Therefore, as the extracts above illustrate, shared laughter de-escalates the dispute and allows for amicable conflict termination. Laughter often mimics the closing sequence and instances where the laughter invitation is accepted by the recipient, the dispute is successfully terminated. Presented below is an alternative example of conflict where laughter is not present.

Extract 3: M1.S1.E1.J1.Camera_(00:15)

```
1    A: yeah but you just say: (0.5) thanks Gin but it's
2       alright (0.4) cause it's spensive you're not
3       allowed to touch it
4       (25:02)
5    A: don't ya
6       (0.6)
7    V: yes ma love
8       (5.6)
9    A:(especially when she's got her friends over)
10      (1.0)
11  →V: alri::ght
12       (1.6)
13  →    stop going on
14       (0.8)
15   A:(like I'd) do that
```

Alicia is particularly prominent in this extract and on lines 1-3 reprimands Victor to which he does not respond. At this point Victor is withdrawn from the conflict as he is declining to participate.[31] However, after a considerable 25 second pause without response, on line 5 Alicia prompts Victor to which he responds on line 7. Victor's turn indicates agreement with Alicia's proposal, using the conflict strategy of submission to assent to her viewpoint and close the dispute.[32] Victor's assent on line 7, after his original withdrawal, provides a clear indication of willingness to terminate the dispute.

Despite this submission to Alicia's view, on line 9 following a further 25 second gap

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[30] Jefferson, "An exercise in the transcription and analysis of laughter".
[31] Vuchinich, "The Sequential Organization of Closing in Verbal Family Conflict".
[32] Ibid.

Alicia either declines or misinterprets Victor's invitation to end the disagreement. Alicia again reprimands Victor, continuing to escalate the argument. On this occasion, Victor delivers further acknowledgement with emphasis on an elongated 'alri::ght' on line 11 and an increment on line 13 with 'stop going on'. Victor not only accuses Alicia of nagging but also reiterates his earlier indication that he is ready for her to terminate the topic and close the discussion. On line 15, Alicia accepts Victor's pre-closing indicator and issues a terminal exchange. Although this conflict is terminated, it is ultimately left unresolved and concludes in a noticeably less positive way when compared to the previous extracts closed using shared laughter.

Discussion

Throughout my research a variety of studies have been considered which support the importance of communication in relationship satisfaction and conflict management[33]. The current research has focused in detail upon communication used by couples to manage disagreements. Through subsequent analysis of the data, a clear phenomenon was identified of shared laughter as a critical conversational technique. Laughter in these disputes served as a mediator to de-escalate and re-orient it to a less serious discussion. The laughter also signals topic termination[34] and allows couples to mutually resolve the dispute without either party losing face.

However, laughter is a particularly delicate conversational element and can be easily misinterpreted by the recipient as negative or aggressive.[35] In these instances the disagreement will not diffuse but escalate further.[36] This was not apparent within the current data corpus, only positive laughter. However, further research may identify aggressive humour and it would be beneficial to understand the role of this negative humour in conflict. Furthermore, although my research aimed for naturalistic data, participants may have been influenced by the presence of the recording equipment and therefore the data may not be as inherently naturalistic as expected.[37] However, participants appeared to become accustomed to the camera, usually recording for hours at a time and the data appeared to be relatively natural. In addition, this study was small scale and therefore research is necessary with a larger data corpus to further support these findings.

However, in spite of these limitations, the findings of this study are supported by, and build upon, previous literature concerning laughter and conversation closings. The research

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[33] Yelsma, (1986), Vuchinich (1990), Birditt et al, (2010), Warner-Garcia, (2014).
[34] Holt, (2011) "On the nature of 'laughables"
[35] Martin, (2007) & Warner-Garcia (2014).
[36] Vuchinich, "The Sequential Organization of Closing in Verbal Family Conflict".
[37] Hutchby and Wooffitt, *Conversation Analysis.*

promotes the use of effective communication for positively managing disputes and supports the belief that laughter is a positive communication technique for mediating and halting the escalation of disputes, ultimately allowing for amicable termination.

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