

Discussion paper

Labelling types and segments of laughter and other interactional vocalisations – Agreements and disagreements

Jürgen Trouvain (Saarland University, Saarbrücken, Germany)

The aim of this discussion paper is twofold: on the one hand it is intended to present the rather unstructured situation with respect to the terminology of i) laughter types, ii) laughter segments and iii) further interactional vocalisations. On the other hand these three areas shall be discussed with concrete examples taken from a spontaneous dialogue corpus. An exchange of ideas about the pros and cons of the various names and approaches of segmentation can help to establish a more standardised use of terms to overcome the slightly chaotic situation of labelling elements of interactional vocalisations.

In contrast to a stereotypical idea of laughter, as one specific category of vocalisation that is characterised by a rhythmical staccato pattern, many forms of laughter that can be very different in their phonetic shape are usually found in spontaneous speech. Grammer and Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1990) divide laughter into voiced and voiceless forms. Bachorowski, Smoski and Owren (2001) label the different laughter types as song-like, snort-like and grunt-like. A further distinction can be made on the basis of the synchrony with speech, be it as speech-laugh (Nwokah et al. 1999) or as smiled speech if smiling is interpreted as a mild form of laughter (cf. Darwin 1872). However, a standardised set of types is missing.

In addition, there is a lack of conventionalisation of terms for various segments of the different laughter types (for a discussion see Trouvain 2003). Typical examples of the messy terminology comprise the voiced portion of a voiced song-like laughter that is named vowel, pulse, note, call, event, burst, syllable or plosive (sic!). The voiceless portion is termed consonant, interval or pause, and names for one voiced plus voiceless portion are cycle, syllable or call. Larger segments are often referred to as bouts or episodes with episodes sometimes divided into bouts. Another matter of debate is which concomitant acoustic information belongs to the laughter, whether e.g. silent pauses with inhalation noises are affiliated with the preceding laughter section or not. Such a combination frequently occurs after longer and/or more intense laughter events and is sometimes described as laughter offset (Chafe 2007).

A related but distinct topic concerns the question what are *other interactional vocalisations*? There is no doubt that e.g. feedback utterances for grounding are to be subsumed under this label which can range from "hm" over "yeah" to more lexical-like words and phrases. Similar to the above mentioned topics on laughter terminology we find here a confusing situation with regard to the labels and the definition of terms (e.g. interjections, discourse particles, conversational grunts, non-speech sounds) and to the degree of linguisticness (Crystal 1969).

References

- Bachorowski, J.-A., Smoski, M.J. & Owren, M.J. 2001. The acoustic features of human laughter. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 111 (3), pp. 1582-1597.
- Chafe, W. 2007. *The Importance of Not Being Earnest*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Crystal, D. 1969. *Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Darwin, Ch. 1872. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: Murray [3rd edition P. Ekman.(ed) Oxford Univers. Press: N. Y., 1998].
- Grammer, K. & Eibl-Eibesfeldt, I. 1990. The ritualisation of laughter. In: Koch, W.A. (ed) *Die Natürlichkeit der Sprache und der Kultur*. Bochum: Brockmeyer, pp. 192-214.
- Nwokah, E.E., Hsu, H.-C., Davies, P. & Fogel, A. 1999. The integration of laughter and speech in vocal communication: a dynamic systems perspective. *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research* 42, pp. 880-894.
- Trouvain, J. 2003. Segmenting phonetic units in laughter. Proc. 15th. *International Congress of Phonetic Sciences* (ICPhS), Barcelona, pp. 2793-2796.