

# CONSTRUCTING COHESION THROUGH LAUGHTER

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## Abstract

One of the most consistently studied constructs within group dynamics literature is that of cohesiveness; the extent to which individuals within a group feel connected. Members of strongly cohesive groups are more inclined to participate and stay with the group, and past research has reported that laughter has the ability to enhance cohesion between individuals, although there is limited work showing exactly *how* this happens. Twenty two students comprising eight groups from two UK universities were video-recorded as they partook in group work, with the resultant sixty four hours of video data being analysed using discursive psychology centring on episodes of laughter in interaction. As ‘sticking together’ is a defining feature of cohesiveness, the analysis focused on instances in which a group member did the opposite of this by group-deprecating; revealing a weakness about the group, with findings showing that cohesion is constructed through the acceptance of and expansion upon the disparagement.

*Keywords:* group work, discursive psychology, laughter, cohesion

As one of the most consistently studied constructs within group dynamics and small group literature, group cohesiveness research is vast. Historically, cohesion has been considered the most important variable in small groups (e.g. Lott & Lott, 1965), but it is also an extremely complex entity to evaluate, with ongoing controversy regarding not only how to define it, but also how to measure it (e.g. Budge, 1981; Keyton, 1992; Greer, 2012).

## *Group cohesion*

Early literature on group cohesion was influenced by Festinger, Schachter & Back (1950) who interpreted cohesiveness as,

the total field of forces (based on the attractiveness of the group and its members, and the degree to which the group satisfies individual goals) that act on members to remain in the group. (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950, pp. 274)

Although this model was influential for its time it has since received much criticism, and there is currently no single accepted definition, with descriptions of cohesiveness pertaining to feeling “strong ties” (Granovetter, 1973) and “connectedness” (O’Reilly & Roberts, 1977) within a group, having uniformity and mutual

support between members (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008) and “sticking together” (Mudrack, 1989). Cohesiveness, therefore, can be thought of as both a descriptive term but also a psychological term to describe the individual psychological processes underlying the cohesiveness of groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008).

Due to the inconsistencies and difficulties regarding definition and measurement, theorists have pleaded for more empirical attention to be paid to the dynamics by which cohesion evolves in groups (e.g. Chiochio & Essiembre, 2009). In particular, there is little research that uses qualitative methodologies to analyse group cohesion, as historically, cohesiveness has been ‘measured’ through individuals’ subjective opinions in order to draw conclusions about the group (Mudrack, 1989). This seems to present somewhat of a conundrum though, as individuals cannot be cohesive by themselves; the cohesiveness comes as a result of interaction with others and as such there is need to study groups in process. Group cohesion can therefore be thought of as a social accomplishment, and one way in which to investigate this is through research into group laughter.

### *Laughter research*

Laughter is a natural phenomenon, universally shared by humans, with origins in non-human primate displays indicating evolutionary functions (e.g. Berlyne, 1969; Ross, Owren & Zimmerman, 2009). We have the ability to produce different types of laughter in different situations, and although we usually associate it with humour, this is only one of many triggers for laughter (Foot & Chapman, 1976). In fact, laughter has been so inconsistently associated with humour that, for many years now, experiments do not use it as a reliable indicator of something being funny (LaFrance, 1983).

Historically, research has focused on the individual *doing* the laughter, as opposed to those *receiving* it, therefore neglecting the important interactional properties of laughter. As stated by Provine (2004, pp.215), “the necessary stimulus for laughter is not a joke, but another person”, which has garnered support from the likes of Holt (2011) who determined that research in the area should no longer focus on trying to explain *why* people laugh, but instead look at what actions are being performed when they do.

As it is a primarily social construct, it is important to consider the ‘socialness’ of laughter in interaction, as opposed to categorising the remarks, actions and situations in response to which people laugh, as has been the case historically (e.g. Pollio & Edgerly, 1976). Prominent factors influencing social laughter are whether others are laughing, what is going on between individuals, who is doing the laughing, what the laugh is about, and so on. Laughter is important in the social setting as it shows affiliation with others (Glenn, 2012), and various experimental studies have shown that people are more likely to laugh if others are laughing, even in

atypical populations (e.g. Young & Frye, 1966; Oliver, Demetriades & Hall, 2002). As detailed by Greatbatch & Clark (2003), empirical research into laughter has identified that it serves five primary functions; one of which being to create and maintain social cohesion and group solidarity, which is the focus of the current paper.

Research into laughter and cohesion covers a broad spectrum, with most studies classifying the ‘type’ of laughter under investigation. For instance, group cohesion has been reported as the result of shared humorous experiences and stories; enhancing a feeling of ‘similar things happen to others too’ (Richman, 1995; Hay, 2000; Kotthoff, 2006). Ziv (2010, pp. 12), for instance, demonstrated that laughter is important for a group as it is “a behavioural expression of something shared”, therefore promoting a cohesive feeling of ‘we-ness’ as opposed to ‘me-ness’, and making the leap between personal identity and group identity (see Turner and Oakes (1986) for more detail).

Similarly, laughter resulting from teasing and joking has been reported to enhance cohesion in a group (e.g. Antonopoulou & Sifianou, 2003; Holmes, 2006; Nesi, 2012). As discussed by Norrick (1994), ‘conversational joking’ (word play, teasing and anecdotes designed to elicit laughter) raises interesting questions because it is associated with aggression but also with rapport, with disrupting conversation but also with facilitating cohesion (e.g. Attardo, 1993; Diallo, 2006). A 1997 publication by Boxer and Cortés-Conde demonstrated how joking can “bond”, by analysing teasing and joking as instruments through which social control is exerted and social identity is displayed. The authors of the paper showed that through the joking about, and mocking of, an out-group, in-group status can be intensified. By jointly poking fun at others not present through techniques such as voicing and exaggeration, individuals co-construct the meaning of what it is to be different from the rest of the group, and cohesion develops from this.

There is still a need, however, for a closer look at how exactly cohesion is established. There is little research pertaining to the fine-grained detail of how laughter can facilitate cohesion, of the sequential organisation of talk in interaction that is inherent although often overlooked that allows cohesion through laughter to take place. It is useful, then, to exemplify what more detailed research has the potential to show.

As one of the founders of conversation analysis, Gail Jefferson is well known for her work documenting the systematic workings of laughter in a variety of interactions (e.g. Jefferson, 1979; 1984; 2004). In particular, Jefferson is credited for her development of notational conventions still used today when transcribing talk, allowing the reader to capture as closely as possible precisely what is said and how it is said. Jefferson’s conversation analytic work demonstrated that, contrary to beliefs that it is spontaneous and involuntary, laughter is organised and precisely

placed, deployed to manage moments in interaction and to help achieve actions. For instance, stemming from Jefferson's (1984) work, Edwards (2005) investigated the phenomenon of complaining, and looked at how laughter can be identified as a way of establishing cohesion between the complainer and listener. He showed through close analysis of interactional features of conversation how laughter can create cohesion even though a real complaint is being made due to the manner in which it is delivered, demonstrating that it has the ability to achieve a goal; i.e., in this case, that 'this is something I would not usually moan about' (Edwards, 2005). Other research has looked at, for instance, the processes involved in orienting to laughter (Holt, 2010), silence where laughter is expected (Drew, 1987), and how interaction is impacted by laughter within words (Potter & Hepburn, 2010).

Research like this highlights the value of using in-depth analysis methods to understand how laughter is treated in interaction. As such, the current paper aims to progress research in the area, by using discursive psychology to closely examine incidences of laughter within group-work settings at university, aiming to expand on past conversation analytical work, and demonstrate that laughter is not random but is highly sequentially organised to perform certain functions within social interaction, such as enhancing group cohesion. Since past research has shown that the overall effectiveness of group work can often rest on the quality of student interactions and that members of strongly cohesive groups are more inclined to participate readily and to stay with the group (Dyaram & Kamalanabhan, 2005), it is imperative to discover how individuals 'do' being cohesive. The research question for the current study therefore is, how does laughter demonstrate group cohesion?

## **Method**

### *The data corpus*

The data used for this study are taken from naturalistic video footage of student groups working in problem-based learning tutorials, a form of student-centred group work which encourages collaborative knowledge construction, independent learning and intrinsic motivation (e.g. Dolmans & Schmidt, 2006). The data was collected between October 2012 and December 2013, from twenty two students comprising eight groups across two UK universities, totalling sixty four hours of video-recorded interaction. Informed, written consent was gained from all participants, and the study received full ethical approval at university level. Each group either set up the cameras themselves, or it was done in advance by the researcher. Data was collected on memory sticks, before being downloaded onto a password-protected computer within the University of Strathclyde, and kept in a locked office with only the named researchers having access to recordings. The video data was transcribed to words-only detail in the first instance, before a data corpus was com-

piled and those extracts chosen for further analysis subjected to Jeffersonian transcription notation (see appendix).

### *Analytical procedure*

A discursive psychological approach was used to analyse the data (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). As advocated by Holt (2011), laughter is not simply a reaction to humour but an action in its own right, and as such discursive psychology is, one of the best methodologies for analysing laughter because it treats it as ‘in the moment’. In addition, it is possible to analyse the interactivity of laughter, and discuss from a discursive psychological viewpoint the function it provides in relation to facilitating group cohesion by looking at such phenomena as, for instance, how group identities are constructed and negotiated. The approach draws on the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1967) and the conversation analysis of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), focusing on how psychological phenomena are constructed and understood in interaction.

Discursive psychology does not align with the more ‘traditional’ values of social psychology, in that individuals’ speech reveals attitudes and behaviour regarding some construct; rather it assumes that talk has an action orientation and that language is used to perform particular social functions, achieved through a variety of rhetorical strategies (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Discursive psychology has been used previously to analyse student tutorial talk (e.g. Koschmann, Glenn & Conlee, 1997; Attenborough & Stokoe, 2012), critiquing the way topics have been traditionally conceptualised in psychology by treating them as interactional entities, as opposed to individual ones.

As such, a data corpus was compiled of laughter extracts stemming from an in-depth transcription which identified laughter particles (Jefferson, 1984), which were broadly categorised in the first instance and included clusters such as ‘sarcasm-’, ‘joking-’ and ‘exaggerating-laughter’. The researcher was particularly interested in those laughter instances stemming from group-deprecation (where an individual in the group portrayed their group in a negative manner somehow). As analysis developed, this was classified as instances of interaction where a student voiced a difficulty that the group was having, and how this was responded to by the rest of the group. Doing so is potentially problematic for a group, as it raises questions pertaining to who has the authority to speak on behalf of others, however, as we will see, it can also enhance cohesion.

## Analysis

The brief analyses below are centred on extracts of interaction in which a student ‘group-deprecates’ within the group setting, which simply refers to an instance of self-deprecation but instead of referring to themselves, the speaker refers to the group as a whole. Past research has demonstrated the intricacies of orienting to another person’s self-deprecation, and the significance of how it is responded to. Pomerantz (1984) identified that if a recipient(s) is to agree with a critical statement, they are endorsing prior criticisms as their own, which is potentially problematic for group dynamics. For instance, if an individual was to make the assessment, “I’m an idiot”, and someone in the group agreed, this could cause tension to arise between the self-deprecator and the respondent, and thus have the potential to create a divide within the group. Conversely, if group members disagree with an individual’s self-deprecation they demonstrate support, in that they actively voice their opposition to the claim. However, this too is not always straightforward and is tied up with issues regarding ingratiation (Jones, 1964).

Agreements and disagreements of self-deprecating talk can be understood through non-verbal interaction too, such as laughter. The current analysis therefore aims to show not only how group members manage the somewhat sensitive nature of group-deprecation, but also how through doing so, social actions such as enhancing group cohesion may be achieved. In the first example below, three students are composing a joint assignment. Phillip is trying to connect his laptop to the main monitor but is struggling to work out how to do so.

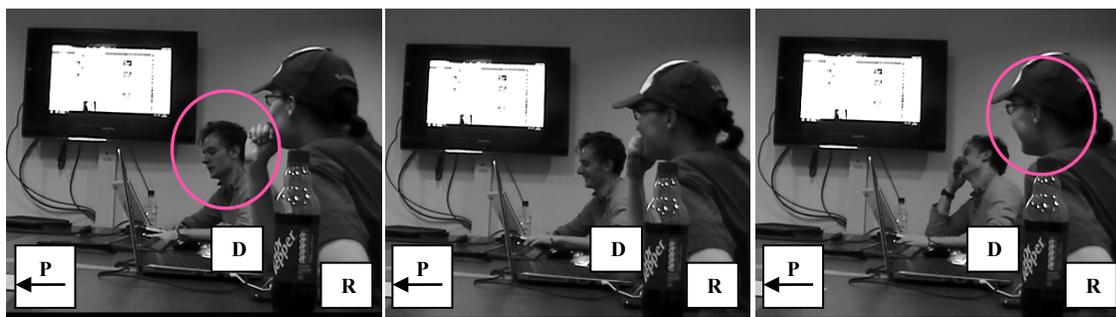
### *Extract 1*

- 1 Donald: ...well d’you wanna- >d’you wanna go on the Google doc and  
2 jus’ see< wh- (.) if I coul’ jus’ >read you what I’ve  
3 done so far an’ see if you guys agree with it< SO we know  
4 we’re goin’ in the same direction at least  
5 Phillip: .hh  
6 (1.0)  
7 Phillip: °um jus’ be a minute°  
8 (1.0)  
9 Phillip: we are scientists we can do this  
10 Rachel: ((turns to look at Phillip)) (1.0)  
11 Donald: fhe[h  
12 Rachel: [heh heh this is (.) the rea:l problem based  
13 [l(h)earnin’  
14 Donald: [heh heh  
15 Rachel: heh

The extract begins with Donald’s suggestion of opening the group’s document so the group can read through the work so far (lines 1-4), but is resisted by Phillip

since he has not yet managed to link his laptop to the monitor. Phillip responds with a dispreferred answer (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), indicating that there is a problem. It would have been much smoother for the interaction if Phillip could have simply responded, “yes” to Donald’s request, but his actual response that he will “jus’ be a minute” (line 7) disrupts the normal flow of the conversation. There is therefore then a lapse in the interaction; a perfect point for someone else to take over talking (Sacks et al., 1974), however, no one else does as Phillip has not yet revealed why the group cannot follow the course of action put forward by Donald.

This is the point at which Phillip disparages the group, although it is somewhat concealed. Instead of directly stating, for instance, “we cannot work out how to do this”, he constructs his assessment of the situation in a positive way; emphasising that being scientists, they *should* be able to do it. This is an interesting labelling of the group; past research has shown that students can be reluctant to identify as such (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe, 2002), and how identifying as a professional in a discipline is inherently beneficial (e.g. MacLeod, 2011). However, in this situation, categorising the group in this way intensifies the severity of the problem they are facing due to the fact that “as scientists”, what they are trying to do should be doable. Had he, for instance, classed the group “as students”, they would not be held in the same way accountable for not being able to accomplish the task. An intriguing point also, is Phillip’s involvement of everyone in the group through stating, “we can do this” (line 9), thus holding everyone equally responsible for the problem, when actually it is only him trying to connect the laptop. This is potentially problematic for the group, depending on how Donald and Rachel treat being categorised not only “as scientists” (and thus expected to know how to solve this problem), but also that they are equally responsible for it in the first place.



(Lines 1-4) Donald asks Phillip to open the group’s document...

(Lines 5-9) ...Phillip orients to the difficulties the group is facing...

(Lines 12-13) ... before Rachel makes a joke based on this.

There is a gap in conversation before Phillip’s utterance is oriented to, during which time Rachel noticeably shifts her gaze from the monitor to Phillip. Goodwin (2000) shows how being a hearer in face-to-face interaction requires the situated use of the body – particularly gaze – as a way of visibly displaying the focus of one’s attention. Donald and Rachel both laugh, supporting Pomerantz’s (1984)

work regarding responding to self-deprecation, and to more recent work showing that laughter may represent agreement (Holt, 2011). Had either Donald or Rachel taken issue with Phillip’s assessment – i.e., the group insult that as scientists they should be able to connect the laptop, but as they cannot, there is something wrong – she would be unlikely to expand on Phillip’s utterance, as she does in line 12.

By stating, “this is the real problem based learning” (line 12), Rachel is accepting that the group is currently encountering a problem, and as such is implicitly agreeing with Phillip’s assessment that the situation they currently face (i.e. being unable to connect the laptop) is not as it should be. The formulation of Rachel’s utterance is similar in structure to a ‘second story’, in that she responds in a way that shows she understood Phillip, using his event and character structure in her own offering (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Sacks, 1992). This, arguably, is evidence of constructing cohesion within the group.

Let us consider another example, taken from a different group of students. In the following extract, we see group member Jackie explaining to the class facilitator (“Facil”) the group’s initial reaction to the class.

### *Extract 2*

16 Facil: ...but it’s good to hear tha’at least (.) some  
17 things are startin to make more sense [(inaudible)  
18 Jackie: [ɛyeah (.)  
19 °ɛyeah° ‘cause the first week=  
20 Ally: ((smiles))  
21 Jackie: =when we started  
22 looking a’it we were all like (.) ‘w(h)hy are we  
23 d(h)oining  
24 Nadia: ((smiles))  
25 Jackie: this class [what does this  
26 Facil: [yeah, ‘oh my God’  
27 Jackie: [even mea(h)n’  
28 Ally: [°heh heh°  
29 Jackie: .hh I think everyone m(h)usta [been like that  
30 Facil: [yeah: yeah:

In this interaction, the group work together to position themselves as able students, by disparaging what they once were. Group member Jackie takes on the role of ‘group speaker’, and tells the class facilitator how the group felt regarding the class in the first week (lines 19-27). The laughter particles throughout this ‘reveal’ may be due to the unusual situation in which a student is admitting she was wary of or even regretting taking the class, in front of the class leader. By stating “we” instead of “I”, Jackie is not holding herself fully accountable for what she is saying; although she is the ‘spokesman’ currently, her views are representative of what the

group feels and thus she alone cannot be admonished for admitting to not enjoying the class in the early days.



(Lines 16-17) The group listen to the facilitator (off-screen) as she is talking...

(Lines 19-27) ...before Jackie admits the group's difficulties when the class first started...

(Lines 13-28) ...which is responded to by her peers.

Jackie's voicing for the group could be responded to in one of two ways; either through agreement or disagreement from her peers to indicate not only to each other, but perhaps more importantly to the class leader that their views are being justly represented. Ally's smile at line 20 indicates that she knows the gist of what Jackie is going to say even before she says it, and Nadia smiles (line 24) a short time after. Consider if either (or both) of Nadia or Ally disagreed with Jackie; it would be likely that they would speak up in order to distance themselves from the potentially disastrous claims being made (i.e. that they were struggling, and therefore are not 'good' students), so by not doing this, they are accepting Jackie's version of events. Jackie tentatively states, "everyone musta been like that", (line 29) in order to show that her group was no different from any other, and thus preserving their identity in that not understanding was not their fault, as "everyone" felt the same way. Ultimately, Jackie is disparaging her fellow group members by admitting that they struggled, which could be responded to negatively and taken as being insulting. However, this deprecation in fact helps to construct cohesion in the group.

At line 22, when Jackie 'active voices' (Wooffitt, 1992) how the group felt in the first week, she emphasises that "all" the group were struggling, accomplishing the goal of showing it was not just her alone, despite being the one who is relaying this, but the whole group, and almost speaks in a reverse 'X... then Y' format (Wooffitt, 2005) by normalising the current feeling of the group by possibly exaggerating how they *used* to feel. Jackie's extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) and active voicing construct it as humorous, that those difficult days are now something that can be laughed at because they are now past them. Ally affiliates this by actually laughing (line 28), which perhaps gives Jackie the incentive to switch from talking as the group ("we"), to providing an individual opinion, ("I think"). Therefore, although the group is disparaged by one of their own, they also demonstrate cohesion through affiliation and support, almost from the beginning of the extract.

Throughout this extract, it is interesting to observe the interaction between the facilitator and the group. The extract begins with an assessment from the facilitator regarding the group's current status, that "things are startin' to make more sense" (line 17), from which point Jackie goes on to detail – even speaking over the facilitator – how differently the group feel now compared to when they first started. The next utterance from the facilitator is at line 26, and is somewhat unusual in that instead of admonishing the group for not asking for help after Jackie's big 'reveal', she very much aligns with Jackie, joining in with active voicing indicating alignment, which perhaps signals to the other group members that it is okay to admit to this, as Ally then actually laughs, upgrading her alignment from simply smiling to an audible expression (line 28). Had the facilitator not joined in with Jackie's assessment of the class, the other group members may have been less willing to demonstrate their alignment for fear of what the facilitator may think. This is somewhat unusual in the typical teacher/ student dyad whereby someone in the 'teacher' role would not tend to disparage their own class. However, because the sequence started by the group discussing the stage they are at currently (i.e. that the class is beginning to make more sense to them), it is more acceptable to disparage what they used to be like, and in fact, the more they do so, the better, as it illustrates the progression they have made.

What these two extracts have aimed to show is that even when a student disparages their group, cohesion is created through extension of the disparagement by someone else in the group and subsequent laughter acquiescence.

## **Discussion**

Group cohesion has been identified as the most important aspect of small group research (Lott & Lott, 1965), and as such, it is vital that student groups are supported for cohesion to take place. The current research can go some way to help those involved in group work teaching or facilitating, by helping them be more aware of the intricate interactions taking place at the group level, and recognising the beneficial properties of laughter. While previous research looked at different 'types' of laughter instigations such as humour, joking and teasing, the current paper focused on the sequential organisation of laughter in which an individual made a group-deprecating utterance, and how this was oriented to by fellow group members.

The point of interest in both extracts is the pattern that emerges, demonstrating cohesion in a group through supporting and extending the disparagement. The deprecator is in a sensitive situation, as they disparage their group in some way. Were fellow group members to disagree with their assessment, past research suggests they would be overtly vocal about it whereas agreements are portrayed more subtly

in order to avoid disrupting the dynamics. In the analysis here, one group member delivered a group-deprecating comment, which was supported in some way by someone else in the group. In extract one, group member Rachel extends the deprecator's comment by initiating a joke based on it, and in extract two, the group facilitator imitates the deprecator's comments, to the acceptance of the rest of the group as evidenced by their affiliative smiles and laughter. The group members acquiesce to the disparagement – and the extension – indicating agreement and thus that they are united, and cohesive, as a group.

In addition, both extracts are focused around the notion of the group comparing themselves to themselves at a different time (i.e. the first extract revolves around the group as they *should* be, and the second looks at the group as they *were*), and seems to suggest that this reflection between different versions of themselves is important for cohesion.

It is important to note than in both examples above, every member of the group was involved in the interaction. Because deprecation is a form of self-tease, the individual doing so is solely responsible for the position he puts him or herself in. If, for instance, the tease was directed at someone else in the group, this could have implications for the group's interpersonal dynamics in that solidarity in sub groups could be created, effectively diminishing group cohesion as a whole, and leading to questions pertaining to whether students work *in* a group or *as* a group, as discussed by Hammar Chiriac (2014).

One of the difficulties of researching a phenomenon such as cohesion is its vague nature; even if all group members report that they felt 'cohesive', this does not necessarily mean that cohesion was accomplished. While past research has tended to focus on measuring cohesion by asking group members how they feel about the group and the task (e.g., Carron, Widmeyer & Brawley, 1985), more discursive-type research has the potential to show how cohesion is constructed naturalistically as it happens in real-time interaction.

This paper is part of an on-going study investigating cohesion in student groups. As researchers working with student participants, it is crucial to recognise what we can do to better support students in higher education. The types of interactions that have been analysed can be found in groups across a broad spectrum of disciplines and it can be useful to focus on the non-academic talk in environments such as these to get an insight into the social processes that can often hinge on the relative success or failure of group work

As educators, we want to encourage students to leave university valuing the skills they have learned through such processes as contributing to group work so that they are prepared for life after university and are not just focused on their final degree classification. Looking at laughter stemming from deprecation may seem a counter-intuitive way of analysing cohesion, but if we can demonstrate benefits that

come from less desirable aspects of the group work, we are better positioned to support students who may experience such settings and be unsure as to how to deal with them.

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## Appendix

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(1.0)	Timed pause
A: word [word	Overlapping talk
B: [word	
.hh	In-breath
wor-	Cut-off word
>word<	Faster speech
WORD	Louder speech
°word°	Quieter speech
<u>word</u>	Emphasised speech
£word	“smiley” speech
wo(h)rd	(h) denotes laughter bubbling within word
wo:rd	: denotes stretching the preceding sound
A: word=	= denotes no discernible pause between two speakers’ turns
B: =word	
((action))	non-verbal action

\*Adapted from system developed by Jefferson, printed in J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.) (1984) Structures of social action; studies in conversation analysis (pp.ix-xvi). Cambridge University Press.

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