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Negotiating seriousness and playfulness through laughter in Italian informal gatherings

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Abstract

This article investigates how participants in informal conversation shift between seriousness and playfulness, and how these changes are locally achieved through laughter. Drawing on ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (CA), the study offers a detailed examination of a 90-minute video-recorded dinner among three Italian friends. Rather than approaching laughter as a set of psychological functions or as an index of emotional states, the analysis focuses on how participants themselves display orientations to seriousness and non-seriousness in the unfolding of a conversation. The paper shows, through three excerpts, how laughter retrospectively transforms potentially delicate actions into playful ones, how it contributes to the collaborative establishment of humorous frames, and how it is mobilized to negotiate alignment in storytelling. Through this analysis, the study demonstrates that laughter is a sequentially placed and a multimodally coordinated practice through which participants publicly configure their interactional stance. While limited to a single event, the analysis offers insights into the fine-grained machinery through which Italian speakers in informal conversation manage stance and relational intimacy.

Keywords: conversation analysis, laughter, ethnomethodological approach, seriousness, playfulness

1 Introduction

Laughter is a universal human action which occurs across a wide range of contexts and circumstances. Individuals from every social group or culture use laughter in daily life and conversational exchanges. Although one might assume that such widespread use makes laughter a simple emotional reflex, research over the past decades has shown that it is far from a simple or spontaneous phenomenon. Growing scholarly interest has led to substantial advances in understanding the different forms laughter can take and the interactional environment in which it emerges. As a result**,** a large body of work now demonstrates that laughter is highly ordered and systematically organized. Therefore, from a conversational perspective, laughter is not merely an emotional outburst but a finely calibrated action whose sequential placement, indexical functions, and multimodal features make it a central object of analytic inquiry. Laughter plays a key role in communication and contributes to interaction in different ways which for example sometimes could be simply an expression of joy, amusement and well-being (Glenn 2003; Trouvain 2014), but it could also be used by participants to display superiority, hostility or embarrassment.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how participants in an informal dinner conversation manage the boundary between seriousness and playfulness through laughter. Rather than treating mitigation, humor, or identity work as separate phenomena, the analysis shows that they are locally occasioned manifestations of a single interactional concern: maintaining, shifting, or renegotiating the seriousness of ongoing actions. Laughter is one resource– coordinated with talk, gaze, and embodied displays – through which participants accomplish this work.

Despite the extensive research on laughter in English, French, and other languages (e.g., Petitjean/González-Martínez 2015; Béal/ Mullan 2017), there still remains comparatively little conversation-analytic work based on Italian informal interaction. This study offers a small contribution to filling this gap by examining a naturally occurring dinner among friends, a setting which provides a dense and analytically fertile environment for observing how participants collaboratively produce and interpret non-serious frames.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, section 2 reviews key CA and ethnomethodological work on laughter, emphasizing its sequential and indexical character. Secondly, section 3 outlines the methodological approach, including the construction of the data collection and criteria for excerpt selection. Thirdly, sections 4 and 5 present three excerpts in which laughter is used to negotiate seriousness/playfulness in different sequential environments. Section 6, finally, concludes by discussing the implications of treating laughter as a situated method for managing interactional stance.

2 Conversation analysis and studies of laughter

Within the broad field of social interaction studies, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have made substantial contributions to understanding how laughter functions as a social and interactional resource. Far from being a mere expression of amusement, laughter is understood as an action employed by participants to manage turns, shape alignments, and negotiate the affective texture of social encounters (Jefferson 1984; Glenn 2003; Glenn/Holt 2013; Steensig 2013). In this perspective, laughter is a methodic accomplishment through which participants sustain or restore social order, manage potentially delicate moments, and display their orientation toward affiliation or disaffiliation.

From this general interactional perspective, an important body of research has shown that laughter works as mitigator or softener in contexts of potentially face-threatening actions such as disagreement, repair, or topic closure. As Brown and Levinson (1987) and Pomerantz (1984) note, social interaction is organized around the management of *face*, and participants rely on subtle resources to maintain relational alignment. Laughter, in this sense, allows speakers to perform actions such as refusal, correction, or critique while preserving affiliative relations. Shaw, Hepburn, and Potter (2013) further demonstrate how *laugh particles* can mitigate the disaffiliative force of a dispreferred response, thereby resolving local interactional tension without derailing the progressivity of talk. These findings directly inform the present study's analysis of how laughter softens dispreferred or delicate actions within informal conversational settings.

A related line of research examines how participants construct laughables, i.e., those stretches of talk made laughable through their design and treatment in interaction. Ford and Fox (2010) identify multiple practices for constructing laughables, including prosodic exaggeration, repetition, and marked embodied displays. Their work shows that laughter is not merely reactive but projectively organized: speakers design turns to invite laughter, while recipients display understanding by laughing at appropriate points. This notion is particularly relevant for the data examined in the present study, in which participants collaboratively build laughables through shared gaze, gestures, and timing, displaying mutual orientation to humor and complicity.

Besides mitigation and laughable construction, conversation-analytic studies have also highlighted the role of laughter in storytelling and affective engagement. Selting (2017) examines how affectivity is displayed and managed in the *climaxes of amusing stories*, showing that laughter serves to escalate and release affective tension while organizing participation. Her analysis demonstrates that laughter contributes to the *performative climax* of the story, marking moments of heightened involvement and shared enjoyment. This framework offers a valuable lens for interpreting how, in the current corpus, laughter accompanies narrative peaks during dinner-table conversations, transforming storytelling into a situation of shared emotion and solidarity.

Furthermore, laughter's sequential placement provides crucial insights into its interactional meaning. Jefferson (1984) showed that laughter inserted within "troubles-talk" allows speakers

to signal self-control and composure, whereas recipients' laughter – or its absence – displays alignment or empathy. Heritage (1984) and Glenn (2003) both emphasize that laughter's meaning is indexical and sequentially grounded: it gains sense only in relation to its local conversational environment. Similarly, Fele (2002) conceptualizes laughter as an *indexical phenomenon* reflecting the local organization of actions, meaning that its function is determined by its position within the ongoing activity rather than by any intrinsic emotional quality.

In institutional contexts, the role of laughter becomes more constrained. Haakana (2001, 2002) observes that in doctor–patient interactions, laughter is often used by patients to resist or challenge authority, while doctors' limited participation in laughter maintains institutional asymmetry. Similarly, Fatigante and Orletti (2013) demonstrate that in gynecological consultations, laughter structures participation frameworks and mitigates the sensitivity of topics; while Ticca (2013) highlights its function in maintaining interactional order even when disalignment occurs. In contrast, in informal or intimate settings, laughter serves as a marker of affiliation, complicity, and emotional closeness, creating spaces of temporary equality and mutual recognition (Glenn 2003; Fatigante/ Orletti 2013).

Concerning phonetic research, laughter examines how its occurrence and structure relate to specific activities, particularly instances of social bonding. The data collected derive from reactions to funny videos designed to provoke laughter (Bachorowski et al. 2001), heterosexual blind dates (Rathcke/Fuchs, 2022), role-playing scenarios (Ludusan/Wagner 2022), and actors enacting emotional expressions (Szameitat et al. 2011).

In light of the arguments presented above, these studies establish laughter as a multifunctional, multimodal, and contextually situated phenomenon, capable of mitigating dispreferred actions, constructing laughables, and organizing affectivity in stories. The present study builds on these insights by examining how participants employ laughter in convivial, peer-based interactions to manage affiliation, negotiate face, and display shared understanding. By connecting the micro-sequential analysis of laughter to broader theoretical debates on affect, alignment, and facework, this study situates itself within a growing conversation-analytic tradition which views laughter as a powerful medium of social organization.

3 Methodology

This study adopts an ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic approach, which provides a detailed examination of how participants organize social action and coordinate with one another in naturally occurring interaction. Within this framework, laughter is not treated as evidence of an internal psychological state but as a publicly available, sequentially organized, and multimodally accomplished practice through which participants negotiate shifts between seriousness and playfulness.

The data consist of a single video-recorded dinner involving three adult friends, lasting approximately ninety minutes. The recording took place in a private home using a static camera positioned to capture the participants' talk, gaze, gesture, and other embodied conduct

throughout the meal. Although the corpus is limited to one event, its naturally occurring character and the density of interactional activities provide a rich environment for examining how participants move between serious and non-serious frames in situated action. The dinner offers a continuous sequence of talk, laughter, assessments, storytelling, and food-related activities, making it a perspicuous site for observing how interactional order is collaboratively produced.

The first step consisted in going through the entire recording, identifying all episodes in which participants produced, invited, or were oriented to laughter. These instances were, then, grouped according to their sequential environment (e.g., after a delicate action, within storytelling, or in response to incongruous formulations). From this preliminary collection, three excerpts were selected for close analysis on the basis of analytic relevance (Psathas 1995), specifically because they offer clear evidence of participants' systematic work in negotiating degrees of seriousness or of playfulness. The aim is not to generalize statistically but to provide detailed demonstrations of how laughter is used to reframe prior turns, coordinate alignment, and mark incongruity within specific sequential contexts.

Talk and laughter were transcribed using Jefferson's (2004) conventions, while embodied conduct - such as gaze shifts, gestures, and posture - was represented following Mondada's multimodal transcription system (2018). Given that prosodic and rhythmic features are crucial for understanding how laughables are produced and recognized, one excerpt includes a QR code linking directly to the corresponding video segment. This allows readers to access aspects of the interaction that cannot be fully captured in the transcription, aligning with recent methodological developments in multimodal and multisensory data presentation. While the presence of a camera can influence participants' conduct (Pomerantz/ Fehr 1997), in this dataset the participants quickly became absorbed in the ongoing dinner activities. Their talk, laughter, and embodied participation appear oriented primarily to the local interaction rather than to the recording device. In Garfinkel's terms (2002), the mealtime interaction constitutes a perspicuous setting: an ordinary activity whose organization makes members' practical reasoning observable in situ.

Finally, this study is situated within the broader literature on mealtime interactions (Keppler 1994; Traverso 1996; Blum-Kulka 1997; Mondada 2009), which shows that shared meals are socially organized, culturally meaningful, and interactionally rich settings. In such environments, laughter emerges as a prominent resource for negotiating alignment, sustaining conviviality, and managing the boundary between seriousness and playfulness.

4 Data

This section presents three excerpts from the dinner recording which illustrate how participants negotiate shifts between seriousness and playfulness through the use of laughter. Although these sequences occur in different environments, as mentioned previously, they each reveal how participants publicly display their orientations to how seriously an action should be taken. Consistent with conversation-analytic principles, the analysis focuses on the sequential

organization of talk and on the multimodal resources which participants draw on to establish or transform the stance of an ongoing action. The aim is not to classify types of laughter, but to demonstrate how laughter acts as a situated, locally consequential resource for reframing actions and shaping the participation framework.

The first excerpt shows a case in which laughter retroactively shifts a potentially delicate categorization into a playful frame. A participant produces an assessment that could be treated as serious or morally loaded; however, the immediate production of laughter, accompanied by embodied cues, works to reconfigure the action as non-serious. Crucially, the recipients' subsequent turns display an orientation to this shift: they accept the move toward playfulness and, thereby, allow the sequence to unfold without escalating the sensitivity of prior action. The interplay between talk, bodily posture, and prosodic features is therefore central to understanding how this shift in stance is jointly achieved.

The second excerpt comes from a storytelling sequence in which participants collaboratively establish a playful frame. A speaker produces a line which invites non-serious treatment, and the laughter which follows – overlapping, rhythmically coordinated, and accompanied by mutual gaze – confirms that the co-participants interpret the action in this way. In this case, laughter not only displays amusement but also helps consolidate a shared understanding of the moment as humorous. The sequential timing of laughter reveals how participants jointly sustain the non-serious footing of the story and maintain mutual alignment in the unfolding humorous frame.

The third excerpt focuses on a moment in which participants navigate fine-grained shifts of affiliation through laughter during a teasing sequence. Here, the issue is not whether something is "funny," but whether the teller's stance is aligned with the interlocutor's behaviour or held at a distance. Either by laughing together, or by delaying or withholding laughter, participants display how they position themselves in relation to the emerging frame – whether they treat the teller's move as playful or as warranting a more serious response. The analysis shows how minute adjustments in gaze, facial expression, and timing allow participants to negotiate whether they are "laughing with" or subtly resisting the playful move.

Across all three excerpts, then, laughter emerges as a multimodal resource for managing stance, enabling participants to recalibrate the seriousness or playfulness of the ongoing action. The ways in which participants collaboratively produce stance transformations is made visible to only attending both verbal and embodied conduct bus also from shifts in gaze to changes in posture and vocal quality.

A core methodological issue concerns the challenge of preserving the situatedness of interaction in written transcription. While detailed notation captures fine-grained features such as overlap or prosody, it cannot fully reproduce the spatial environment, the coordination of bodies and objects, or the rhythmic timing that is especially relevant for understanding laughter. For this reason, one transcript includes a QR code which links directly to the corresponding video segment. This methodological choice enables readers to observe gesture, intonation, gaze shifts, and spatial arrangements as they unfold in real time, providing access to dimensions of the interaction which are otherwise difficult to render on the page. This bridge

between transcript and audiovisual data enhances analytic transparency and allows readers to better appreciate how participants use multimodal cues to negotiate seriousness, playfulness, and alignment.

Incorporating these multimodal resources therefore, strengthens this analysis by showing how laughter operates as a delicate and methodically deployed tool for stance negotiation, rather than as a mere reflection of internal states. Through these excerpts, we see how participants continually monitor each other's actions and use laughter to collaboratively shape the moral, affective, and epistemic status of what is happening in that moment.

5 Analysis

5.1 *Excerpt 1: Laughter, teasing, and the negotiation of a non-serious frame*

This excerpt illustrates how participants collaboratively transform a potentially delicate categorization into an episode of play. From an interaction-analytic perspective, the issue is not whether a term is *objectively* offensive, but how participants themselves treat, frame, and negotiate its meaning in situ. The sequential and multimodal organization of the conversation reveals a transition – or, in Goffman's terms, a re-keying – from a serious footing to a playful one (Goffman 1974), enacted through laughter, smiling, gaze, and reciprocal teasing. Such practices function as metacommunicative messages, echoing Bateson's insight (1972) that non-seriousness is recognizable as play because participants signal a "this is play" frame. Actions which might otherwise be interpreted as serious, aggressive, or consequential become recognizable as play because participants produce signals which communicate how the action should be understood. These signals operate at a metacommunicative level: they do not add new content, but instruct others on how to interpret the ongoing action. Within this interactional shift, laughter plays a key role in showing that the categorization is to be understood within a non-serious frame (Jefferson 1984; Glenn 2003).

It stands to reason that, food offers and refusals are a well-known locus of dispreferred actions (Pomerantz 1984): they often invite mitigation, accounts, or affiliative cushioning. Stefano orients to this delicate situation by providing a justification ("I am full"). Maria's subsequent teasing assessment in line 5 ("what a liar"), accompanied by a wink and smile, introduces an alternative participation framework. Her embodied conduct offers Stefano interpretive resources to understand the turn as humorous rather than morally accusing. In terms of Drew's analysis of teasing (1987), Maria provides a "provocation-in-a-safe-frame," treating Stefano as a legitimate target while simultaneously signaling that the action is non-serious.

1 STE allora mi prendo queste due melanzan[ine
then I take these two pieces of eggplant
2 ALE [vuoi un pò di +pane per fare:
do you want bread to do
+take the
bread and clean the
sauce on the plate

3 STE no no ti prego (0.5) sono sa:z[io=
no no please I am full
4 ALE [Dai è buono
Come on it's good
5 MAR che *falso
what a liar
**she winks and smiles at ste---->*
6 STE No #tu (.) tu sei una cicciona* HEH HEH HEH heh hh
ste *#looks at mar*
mar **looks at ste, smiles at him*
No you you are the chubby one HEH HEH HEH heh hh

7 ALE Dai! lo vuoi un pò di sugo da portare a casa?
ale *Come on! Do you want some sauce to take home?*
8 STE No no (.) veramente he he fAi la donna del sud
ste *No no really he he you're acting like a southern woman*
9 ALE ah ah hh davvero oh
ale *ah ah hh really oh*

Stefano's response in line 6 ("you are the chubby one"), delivered with an immediate burst of laughter, is crucial to understand this situation. Rather than functioning merely as mitigation, the laughter accomplishes a stance shift (Clift 2016): it retroactively frames the categorization as humorous and invites co-participants to treat it as such (Jefferson 1984). By adopting what Glenn terms a "laughing voice" (2003), Stefano signals that the utterance belongs within a playful key, not an earnest insult. Maria's reciprocal smiling and mutual gaze constitute public evidence of alignment (Goodwin 1981; Haakana 2010), demonstrating that she also understands and ratifies the playful frame.

The multimodal conduct observable across the excerpt – softened facial expressions, relaxed posture, mutual smiling, and synchronized gaze (Mondada 2018) – provides additional evidence that the categorization is not treated as morally serious. Rather than indexing hostility, these embodied cues enact what Fine e DeSoucey describe as a "joking culture" (2005), whereas teasing serves as a relational resource for maintaining solidarity. Importantly, the shift to play is co-constructed: Maria initiates a playful key, Stefano reciprocates and escalates it, and Alessandra subsequently aligns with it.

Alessandra's renewed offer of food (line 7) and Stefano's laughter-infused refusal ("really hehe…") continue this playful footing. The incorporation of laugh particles within a dispreferred response aligns with Holt's (2013) and Shaw, Hepburn e Potter's observations (2013): laughter helps soften the dispreference while preserving affiliation. Alessandra's own laughter in line 9 confirms that she participates in and ratifies the play frame too.

Overall, the excerpt demonstrates how participants use laughter, teasing, and multimodal conduct to collaboratively renegotiate the moral valence of potentially delicate actions. Through a series of sequentially organized cues, the participants transform a moment of possible face-threat into an interactionally safe, playful, and affiliative episode. The analysis underscores the importance of examining participants' own orientation to seriousness versus playfulness, rather than importing analytically external notions of offense.

Thus, Excerpt 1 demonstrates how participants collaboratively negotiate the seriousness of potentially delicate actions. Laughter, sequentially and multimodally organized, is the key resource through which a potentially sensitive categorization becomes reconfigured as playful, affiliative, and interactionally safe.

5.2 Excerpt 2: *Shared Laughter and the local establishment of a playful frame*

This excerpt illustrates how participants move from a matter-of-fact discussion about travel time to the collaborative establishment of a playful frame, accomplished through the sequential placement of laughter and coordinated embodied conduct. Consistent with conversation-analytic principles (Sacks et al. 1974; Heritage 1984), the focus here is not on identifying intrinsic "jokes" or psychological intentions, but on examining how participants publicly display that they are treating an utterance as non-serious.

```
1 ALE  domani guiderò fino a Reggio Emilia
       tomorrow I will drive to Reggio Emilia
2 STE  mhmh (.) Reggio Emi, lOntano!
       mhmh  Reggio Emi, far away!
3 MAR  quanto ci metti? Quattro ore?
       How long does it take? Four hours?
4 STE  mmm (.) Ci sta
       mmm it's doable
5 ALE  l'ho sempre fatto
       I have always done it
6 STE  io non viaggerei mai quattro ore# da* solo
       (0.8)
       I would never travel four hours# by* myself by car
       (0.8)
  mar                                  #looks at ste---->
  ale                                      *looks at ste---->
7 STE non ci arriverei a destinazione heh heh heh
      I would die halfway heh heh heh
8 MAR mhe[mhe
9 ALE    [HAHAHAHA non ci arriverei
          HAHAHAHA I would die halfway
10 ALE una volta sono arrivata a Padova (0.5) sono cinque ore e mezza (.)
       è pesante ragazzi
   ale once I drove all the way to Padua (0.5) it's five and a half hours  (.) it's tough guys
11 STE ma da solA?
   ste but alone?
12 ALE si
   ale yes
13 STE ehhh
14 ALE eh ti Annoi, infatti inizio a chiamare tutti al telefono ma
       neeehhhsuno risponde
   ale eh you get bored, in fact I start calling everyone on the phone but  nooohhhbody answers
15 STE ahah perfAvore:
```

ste ahah pleease

In lines 1–5, the participants engage in routine informational talk about the duration of a car trip. Nothing in this initial exchange projects a humorous trajectory. However, in line 6, Stefano's turn ("I would never travel four hours by myself") introduces a stance that could be developed either seriously or playfully. Crucially, this turn is followed by a notable pause (0.8) during which both Maria and Alessandra suspend their eating, orient their gaze toward Stefano, and thereby create what Goodwin (1981) describes as a shared participation framework. This moment of poised attention suggests that the co-participants are projecting an upcoming action of interactional relevance (Schegloff 2006).

Stefano fulfils this expectation in line 7 with the formulation "I would die halfway," which contains a clear exaggeration and is immediately accompanied by laughter ("heh heh heh"). Following Jefferson (1984), the integration of laughter into the turn marks Stefano's stance: he displays that his formulation is not to be taken literally and invites recipients to treat it as laughable.

Maria and Alessandra respond almost simultaneously with overlapping laughter (lines 8–9). Their prompt and coordinated laughter is not merely a reaction to humour but a public ratification of Stefano's proposed stance (Glenn 2003; Glenn/ Holt 2013). Alessandra's partial repetition of Stefano's line ("I would die halfway") further contributes to what Ford and Fox (2010) describe as the co-construction of a laughable stance: recipients collaboratively transform a candidate joke into a shared playful moment through vocal, prosodic, and lexical alignment.

The sequential outcome is that the participants jointly shift the footing of the interaction (Goffman 1974). A potentially serious discussion about driving long distances is re-keyed into a playful frame, with laughter serving as the primary resource through which this transformation is displayed and confirmed.

After this shared laughter peak, Alessandra initiates a personal narrative (line 10), recounting her experience of driving to Padua. Even though the turn presents factual content, its placement immediately after the jointly ratified laughable suggests that she is orienting to the playful footing which is already established. Stefano's minimal question ("but alone?", line 11) and Alessandra's brief confirmation (line 12) complete an adjacency pair that does not disrupt the playful stance but maintains participation in the ongoing activity.

Stefano's "ehhh" in line 13, while formally minimal, functions as a continuer (Gardner 2001), indicating his recipiency and inviting further narrative elaboration without shifting the interaction into seriousness. Alessandra's subsequent description of coping with boredom (line 14) involves marked prosodic stylization, particularly in the elongated pronunciation of "neeehhhsuno," which foregrounds the utterance as performative and potentially laughable. Selting (2017) notes that such prosodic stylization serves to heighten affective involvement and invite a playful interpretation.

Stefano's response in line 15 ("ahah pleease") incorporates laughter and an exaggerated prosodic contour, reaffirming his alignment with the playful frame. The laughter here does not

introduce humor *ex novo* but displays that he treats Alessandra's narrative contribution as continuing the light-hearted stance jointly constructed earlier.
Taken together, this excerpt demonstrates how participants jointly negotiate the seriousness or playfulness of an ongoing course of action. What begins as a serious discussion is gradually reconfigured through:

- a moment of interactionally sustained expectation (pause and shared gaze),
- the introduction of an exaggerated formulation with laughter,
- the immediate ratification of this stance through overlapping laugher,
- and the maintenance of the playful frame through stylization and affiliative laughter in the subsequent storytelling.

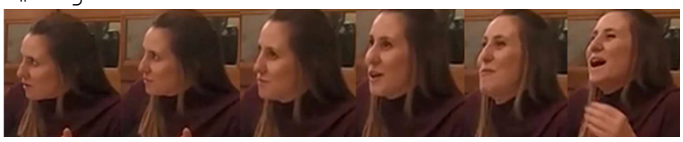
In line with CA research on laughter and stance (Jefferson 1984; Glenn 2003; Ford/ Fox 2010), this sequence shows that laughter is not simply a reaction to humour but a methodical resource for establishing, sustaining, and negotiating a playful orientation in interaction.

5.3 *Excerpt 3: Calibrating Alignment and (Non-)Seriousness Through Embodied Laughter*

This excerpt examines how participants use laughter, not simply to "laugh with" or "laugh at" one another in a social-psychological sense, but to visibly negotiate shifts between serious and playful stances within a storytelling sequence. In line with CA research on stance and laughter (Jefferson 1972; Glenn 2003; Glenn/ Holt 2013), the analysis focuses on how participants publicly display their alignment or disalignment through multimodal conduct – gaze, facial expression, body posture, and prosody – rather than on inferred mental states or pre-existing identities (Krug 2025).
The segment begins with Alessandra introducing a personal experience involving a thunderstorm (line 1). Her account frames the event as potentially serious ("I looked like a crazy person"; "I didn't sleep at all"), projecting a story about distress. Maria's response in line 2 ("BEEE I heard it") partially overlaps with Alessandra's telling and does not affiliate straightforwardly with the emotional trajectory set up by the teller. Alessandra's widened eyes and brief laugh provide a publicly available display of disalignment with Maria's stance; she treats Maria's response as unexpected or incongruous in relation to the frame she was projecting (Goodwin 1984; Haakana 2010). Figure 1 further illustrates the gradual change in Alessandra's facial expression, moving from a surprised gaze toward Maria to the onset of laughter.

1 ALE Sembravo una pazza↑ questa mattina (0.4) mi sono alzata >non ho dormito un cacchio perché stanotte ha fatto il delirio<=
I looked like a crazy person this morning (0.4) I got up I didn't get any sleep because last night was really noisy
2 MAR BEE*#EL l'ho senti[to
BEEE I heard it
*ale * looks at mar with surprised eyes and laughs*

#Fig1



3 STE [bello?#Hh heh hh
beautiful?Hh heh hh
4 ALE HAHAHAH hhh .hh

#Fig2

5 MAR Si lo sai perché? Perché c'era il temporale ed ero abbracciata a Viiito=
Yes do you know why? Because there was a storm and I was hugging Viiito
6 STE =oo+oh
ste +looks at mar and smiles
7 ALE Io non avevo nessuno e sono morta dalla paura [hh
I had no one and I got scared to death hh
8 STE [HAH hh heh
9 MAR OH (.) pure io ho avuto pAura
OH I was scared too
10 ALE così (0.3) mi sono svegliata alle quattro e cinquantacinque vuuuuu
then I woke up at five to five vuuuuu
11 MAR quattro e cinquan#tacinque
five to five
mar # laughing tone
12 ALE eh si mi ricordo l'orologio
eh yes I remember the clock
(0.5)
vuuuuu (0.2) +VUUUU *⊥putupùm putupùm →
ale *raises both her hands upwards
ste ⊥looks at ale
mar +looks at ale, smiles at her
13 STE p⊥ut(h)upùm putupùm mhmh mhmh
ste ⊥looks at mar and laughs
14 MAR hiih# Hiih
mar #looks at ste and laughs

Stefano's turn in line 3 ("beautiful?" with laughter) builds on this incongruity. The laughter is not secondary to the utterance but central to its stance display: it signals that Stefano is treating the moment as playable-with, and invites others to do the same (Jefferson 1984). His

formulation also constitutes a teasing challenge (Drew 1987), indexing a shift toward a non-serious footing (Goffman 1974). Alessandra responds with loud laughter in line 4, aligning herself with Stefano's reframing of the moment as humorous. The participants' bodies further reinforce this stance: both Alessandra and Stefano lean back from the table while covering their mouths. Such synchronized bodily withdrawal, as Mondada notes (2009), is not incidental but a multimodal display of shared stance, visually enlarging the distance from the serious footing initially projected. Their embodied withdrawal temporarily suspends the normative postures expected around a dinner table, making playfulness publicly recognisable.

Maria's turn in line 5 provides an explanatory elaboration ("Because there was a storm and I was hugging Vito"), which can be heard as a response to the implicit epistemic trouble created by the prior laughter. In other words, the participants' laughter acted as a non-serious request for clarification, prompting Maria to account for the evaluative position she had taken. This echoes findings that laughter can initiate elaboration or repair without framing the action as confrontational (Jefferson 1984; Glenn 2003).

In lines 7–9, the story shifts again: Alessandra offers a self-deprecating comparison ("I had no one and I got scared to death"), which she delivers with laugh particles. Laughter here indicates that she treats her own experience as available for playful framing despite the ostensibly "serious" content. Stefano's overlapping laughter (line 8) and Maria's affiliative "OH… I was scared too" (line 9) suggest renewed alignment around a non-serious stance.

A second locus of incongruity emerges when Alessandra reports waking up "at five to five" (line 10). Maria repeats "five to five" with a laughing tone (line 11), marking the precise timestamp as potentially excessive or unexpected. This repetition with laughter performs a dual function: it highlights the oddity of the detail and simultaneously nudges Alessandra toward elaborating the situation (Goodwin 1997; Selting 2017).

Alessandra's subsequent production of onomatopoeic storm sounds accompanied by dramatic gestures (line 12) departs from the descriptive format expected in an ordinary narrative. This constitutes what Glenn (2003) refers to as enacted storytelling, in which participants shift from reporting to embodied performance. The exaggerated sounds ("vuuu, VUUU, putupùm putupùm"), combined with the upward movement of her hands, present a marked departure from the mundane conversational frame and are treated as such by the recipients. Stefano immediately echoes the onomatopoeias ("putupùm putupùm," line 13) while laughing, and Maria joins him (line 14). Their laughter is simultaneously directed at the enacted performance and aligned with Alessandra's playful intent, without signalling disaffiliation. Rather than laughing "at her," they are laughing at the incongruity generated by her sudden shift into performative mode, an effect well documented in CA studies of humor (Jefferson 1984; Partington 2006).

Importantly, laughter here marks not simply the humorous nature of Alessandra's gestures but the transition into a fully playful frame, where storytelling becomes a jointly animated performance rather than a serious report. The laughter serves as a resource for displaying that all participants recognize and ratify this footing shift.

In summary, Excerpt 3 shows how participants use laughter to navigate subtle stance movements within storytelling. Laughter here, therefore, functions to:

- mark moments of incongruity or disalignment,
- invite clarification without escalating into serious repair,
- collaboratively rekey a narrative from serious to playful,
- and coordinate embodied displays of alignment.

Through these practices, the participants jointly configure the seriousness or playfulness of the unfolding story, showing how laughter and embodied conduct operate together as fine-grained tools for stance negotiation (Glenn 2003; Mondada 2018; Stivers 2008).

6 Conclusion

This study has examined how participants in a naturally occurring dinner conversation negotiate shifts between seriousness and playfulness through laughter, drawing on an ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic perspective (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks et al. 1974). Rather than treating laughter as a set of discrete functions or as an expression of internal affect, this analysis has shown that its meaning emerges from its sequential placement and multimodal coordination. Across the three excerpts, laughter operates as a local, publicly available resource through which participants recalibrate the stance of an unfolding action – whether a teasing categorization, a travel-related assessment, or a moment of storytelling.

These findings can be interpreted through the concepts of *stance* and *alignment* (Stivers 2008). Laughter functions as a key interactional resource for signaling participants' stance, that is, the way in which a just-produced action is to be understood – for example, as playful rather than serious, or as exaggerated rather than literal. Through laughter, speakers thus make publicly available the "tone" with which they are treating what has been said. At the same time, laughter plays a central role in the negotiation of alignment, in displaying whether and how participants position themselves in relation to one another. When co-participants promptly join in laughter and coordinate embodied conduct such as gaze or smiling, they display a shared interpretation of the action and thereby align with a common footing. When laughter is delayed, withheld, or redirected, this may signal distance or disalignment without necessarily escalating into overt disagreement. In this sense, shifts between seriousness and playfulness do not depend on individual intentions or internal emotional states, but emerge from the interaction itself, through moment-by-moment displays of stance and the fine-grained calibration of alignment among participants.

This analysis demonstrates that the distinction between "serious" and "playful" is not predetermined but interactionally accomplished, moment by moment. Following Jefferson's insights (1984) on the sequential organization of laughter, the excerpts show how speakers use laugh tokens, prosodic stylization, gaze, and embodied movement to signal that a turn is to be understood in a non-serious frame; and how co-participants confirm or resist this invitation through their next actions (Heritage 1984; Glenn & Holt 2013). Laughter, therefore, provides a

central means by which participants collaboratively manage stance and avoid the escalation of delicate moments.

Firstly, in Excerpt 1, a potentially sensitive categorization is retroactively framed as playful through its immediate coupling with laughter. The participants' uptake – smiling, reciprocal laughter, and relaxed posture – displays a shared orientation to a non-serious footing. Rather than functioning as a fixed "mitigation strategy," laughter here constitutes a method for rekeying the prior turn into playfulness (Goffman 1974), enabling the interaction to proceed without friction.

Secondly, Excerpt 2 showed how a playful frame can be projectively constructed. A pause combined with mutual gaze creates expectancy, which is fulfilled by Stefano's exaggerated formulation accompanied by laughter. The recipients' synchronized laughter ratifies the move toward playfulness, illustrating how laughables are collaboratively built (Ford/Fox 2010) and how playfulness is sustained through embodied and prosodic coordination.

Finally, in Excerpt 3 laughter serves to navigate subtle forms of alignment within storytelling. Recipients use laughter to highlight incongruities, invite elaboration, and display affiliation with the teller's stance. Embodied practices – such as leaning back, covering the mouth, or reenacting a storm – shape the interactional trajectory and make visible how participants co-construct moments of shared amusement (Mondada 2018; Glenn 2003). The sequence reveals that "laughing with" and "laughing at" are not fixed categories but locally negotiated stances, indexed through the timing and embodied design of laughter.

Taken together, the findings contribute to ongoing CA research by demonstrating that laughter is best understood not as a list of functions but as a stance-bearing device whose interactional import depends on its sequential environment. Its affiliative or disaffiliative force is indexical (Garfinkel 1967): it derives from participants' orientations within the unfolding activity rather than from inherent semantic or psychological properties.

Methodologically, the close multimodal analysis underscores the value of examining laughter within rich ecological settings such as shared meals (Mondada 2009). The dinner-table environment provided a perspicuous site for observing how talk, laughter, gaze, posture, and material arrangements intertwine in the local production of stance. By anchoring the analysis in participants' visible orientations, the study avoids broad cultural or sociological claims and instead offers a detailed demonstration of how stance negotiation is achieved in one naturally occurring interaction.

The study's primary limitation is the small dataset: a single dinner conversation cannot support generalizations about laughter in Italian interaction or informal gatherings more broadly. Future research should extend this approach to additional cases and contexts to examine how the management of seriousness and playfulness may vary across settings, activities, and participant constellations.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights a central point: laughter is not a collateral event in speech but a methodic resource through which participants monitor each other's actions, negotiate stance, and maintain the social intelligibility of the moment. In this sense, laughter

exemplifies the ongoing, situated work through which participants produce and recognize the shifting boundaries between serious and non-serious interaction.

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