

Laughing Out Loud: The Potency of *Lol* as a Discourse Marker Due to the Semantic Residue of
Laughter

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Kassidy R. Chapman

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Abstract

Laughter is an integral part of human communication. It is therefore unsurprising that people have invented ways to express laughter on the internet. This phenomenon, such as *hahaha* and *lol*, is known as e-laughter and it plays a significant role in online communication. There has been substantial linguistic research on e-laughter which focuses on syntactical elements of language but little rhetorical research which examines what functions of discourse e-laughter takes online. In this thesis, I will analyze the acronym *lol* as it appears online in computer mediated interactive conversation, specifically text messaging and Twitter. In an effort to add rhetorical analysis to this body of research, this project takes the current linguistic analysis of *lol* that claims it functions as a discourse marker and combines it with the rhetorical use of literal laughter in face-to-face conversation. By this combination, I hope to show that *lol* continues to function as a discourse marker while also retaining the semantic residue of the functions of literal laughter, giving it extra potency as a discourse marker.

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Introduction

It seems unlikely that the acronym *lol*, which has been decried as laziness and slang, would carry any linguistic or rhetorical weight in online conversation. *Lol*, much like other “slang” such as hahaha or hehehe, is a spelled out representation of laughter usually used on the internet, a phenomenon known as electronic or e-laughter. E-laughter appears on the internet and in other computer-mediated forms of communication very frequently, and contrary to popular belief, functions in a variety of important ways. The research on e-laughter in general is still rather slim due to its relatively recent development, and there is still plenty of research to be done. Of the research there is on e-laughter, most of it centers on how e-laughter functions linguistically; there is a lack of work done on how it functions rhetorically. It is to the latter body of research that I hope to contribute here.

It might seem strange that e-laughter should be considered an important element of effectively communicating online. However, it is vital that the study of e-laughter continues because of how quickly it is becoming a significant element of online communication. The normal change in meaning and language has been accelerated by the advent of the internet, and elements of online communication, like e-laughter, are continually becoming more important in effectively expressing oneself online. Without research that articulates how e-laughter functions, the academic world of linguistics and rhetorical studies will be ignorant of the knowledge that the masses possess— though cannot articulate— about the use and meaning of intentional and subtle elements of language. Even though a young person might not have the vocabulary or even the self-awareness to express their linguistically and rhetorically sophisticated use of e-laughter, an academic may not know, as the young person does, how to use and manipulate e-laughter to

their advantage in an online discourse. If we want to be able to communicate online more effectively, we must understand the lifeblood of online communication, part of which is e-laughter. These representations of laughter, such as *lol*, which began as abbreviations to cut the characters of a text message, have now become sophisticated, multifunctional linguistic and rhetorical devices used primarily as discourse markers that carry the semantic residue of their origins in literal laughter.

In this thesis, I hope to summarize existing scholarship and further develop the linguistic and rhetorical research on the use of e-laughter, particularly *lol*, and show why is it so important for us to understand in our online communication. In the first section, I will introduce texting and elaborate on computer-mediated online conversation by showing how this phenomenon mimics speech. I will then in the second section explain the functions of discourse markers and their significance in communication. In the third section, I will discuss e-laughter, its history and development. The fourth section will analyze e-laughter in a corpus of text messages that will be introduced at the beginning of that section. I will then in the fifth section look at semantic residue that is left in e-laughter along with the rhetorical uses of literal laughter. The sixth section will discuss e-laughter as used in Twitter in a rhetorical fashion. By combining the research on discourse markers and the rhetorical use of literal laughter along with primary analysis of real messages on social media, I will be able to show the potency of *lol* as a discourse marker because of the residual semantic content that it retains from literal laughter.

To head off confusion, I will first define some terms and clarify how I will be using them. First, because this study deals extensively with text messaging, I will be using the term “text messaging” each time I refer to this kind of computer mediated communication. This is not to be

confused with a “text” in reference to a book or other utterance within a literary container, e.g. the written words of a particular source. In contrast, the word “message” alone will be used analogously with “utterance.” Message as I will use it does not refer to a text message, but instead to any kind of communication packet, such as a sound bite in spoken conversation, a message sent over the internet, or a book. Message simply denotes a communication that is sent to another individual. The originator of a message will be referred to as the “sender” and the one who receives the message will be called the “receiver.”

Linguistics, in contrast to rhetoric, is a branch of English studies that centers on the form and placement of words syntactically and semantically. In this study, the linguistic analysis is mostly in the sections regarding text messages and the way *lol* is being used syntactically therein. The linguistic category of discourse markers and the function of e-laughter will mostly be explained through linguistic analysis. Rhetoric, on the other hand, deals with the way words are used to carry meaning and advance a discourse. After analyzing e-laughter linguistically, I will turn to examining it rhetorically in how it is used by real people in actual online situations. Where linguistics attempts to describe the function of words in a sentence and their meaning within themselves, rhetoric hopes to explain how people use words to further a discourse.

1. Introduction to Computer-Mediated Interactive Conversation

Texting as we know it today is rather broad in scope of meaning. In contrast to ten or fifteen years ago when the phrase “text me” had only one interpretation, texting now includes both Short Message Services and Multimedia Message Services (hereafter SMS and MMS), which are services that use cellular connection in contrast to Over The Top applications (hereafter OTT) such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger which function using internet

connection. There are a plethora of applications that facilitate instant or text messaging, many of which make use of different computer science mechanisms. Linguistically speaking, however, all these services create the same phenomena of language. The question then becomes how we can accurately describe these phenomena. Sali A. Tagliamonte and Derek Denis in their essay titled “Linguistic Ruin? LOL! Instant Messaging and Teen Language” say that “IM [instant messaging] is a one-to-one synchronous form of computer-mediated communication” (3). While this definition sounds accurate based on general experience, it is too specific. In the world of teenagers and young adults, group texts with as many as twenty or thirty people are not uncommon, and while texting is sometimes synchronous, text messages will often be sent with the regularity of less time sensitive emails than real time conversation. Simply referring to text messaging, however, by the definition that is left— a “form of computer-mediated communication”— is obviously too broad. The linguistic phenomenon that occurs in texting, then, is not easily defined with computer science or linguistic terminology. John McWhorter in a TedTalk described texting as “fingered speaking,” saying that texting is writing like speaking just as a formal speech would be speaking like a writing. I will call this phenomenon “computer-mediated, interactive conversation” (CMIC), and I propose that it occurs in more formats than text messaging. The key word in the above label is “conversation.” Thus, an email that is personal and informal in nature and tone would fall into this category, and a text message that only relays information (as a billboard or advertisement does) would not. Like many categories in linguistics, CMIC is not quantifiable and does not have definite boundaries but only characteristics common to unique instances. While texting is the most obvious relatively

consistent form of CMIC, various online formats geared toward conversation and informal dialogue, such as Twitter and other social media apps, would also be included.

The essence of CMIC draws from basic theories of language and communication. Although CMIC can be used in various formats, I will use text messaging, where it appears most consistently, for purposes of description here. As I said above, while there is no quantifiable definition of this phenomenon, there are general boundaries that can help determine if a text is CMIC. In an article titled “Spoken Discourse Markers in Written Text,” Michael McCarthy discusses spoken and written communication along with an area of language theory surrounding mode and medium. McCarthy points out that while some texts are meant to be read and others spoken, there is no reason these cannot overlap. He says, “Any text can potentially be delivered to its receivers via either the spoken or written medium. A written text primarily intended for silent reading (for example, a modern novel) can be read aloud, and spoken conversations can be written down and read” (170). He then makes the useful distinction between “mode” and “medium” (170). Medium, he claims, describes the way in which an utterance is transmitted, either through speech or written text. Mode, on the other hand, “is concerned with how [an utterance] is composed stylistically, that is, with reference to sociolinguistically grounded norms of archetypical speech and archetypical writing” (McCarthy 171). What McCarthy explains here dispels a common misconception in the general public about language: that speech and writing are generally separate forms of communication with no overlap. As far as medium is concerned, this is true. Regarding mode, however, speech and writing create a spectrum. While every utterance in a particular instance is either spoken or read, any piece of communication can stylistically be in between speech and writing.

The obvious question, then, is where CMIC falls on the speech-writing spectrum. To use texting as a case study, my personal experience indicates that texting would fall further toward archetypical speech patterns than an email or even a formal speech. Christina Kalaidzhieva in her book *Internet and the Human Communication* expresses where text messaging, and thus CMIC, lands in relation to speech and writing, saying that “texting is a medium between reading a static text (email, note, etc.) and directly communicating with the person (talking), because the communication is visualized (written) but it occurs in a repetitive communicative rhythm imitating a spoken conversation in real time” (71). While not all text messaging occurs at the speed of a spoken conversation, Kalaidzhieva’s point remains true. Texting contains some elements of speech and others of writing so that it becomes a marriage between the two. Working with a French texting corpus, Deniz Uygur-Distexhe says this:

Text messaging is first and foremost a written medium, just like all text-only CMC [computer-mediated communication]. This means that users “do not see or hear their interlocutors and thus do not have access to non-verbal information about how others are responding” (S.C. Herring 1999). On the other hand, texting also has oral characteristics in the way the writer is involved with the recipient (see W. Chafe 1982 for the notion of “involvement”) and uses a list of colloquial expression...that show[s] this involvement. (245)

As we can see here, text messaging is at its core a written medium, with all the advantages of written utterance, such as being able to change what is typed before it is sent; however, much like speech, texting often happens in—or nearly in—real time. In addition, texting looks like

speech in certain elements, such as being more contextualized and disjointed, as well as using stylistic choices primarily associated with speech such as discourse markers.

2. Discourse Markers

Discourse markers, the most popular among a host of competing and overlapping terms such as “discourse particles” and “pragmatic markers” for instance, are one of the broadest categories in linguistics (Müller 3). Consider the following text message drawn from the corpus used in this study:

Oh ok i didnt know what you meant.

How is the word “oh” functioning in this text message? There is little, if any, semantic content. It is not describing anything; neither is it necessary to the grammar of the sentence. If removed, this text would still make grammatical sense, but our social intuition about informal communication would tell us that removing “oh” would change the meaning of the text message. What then is the function of *oh* in this text message?

Oh, in fact, is functioning here as a discourse marker. Describing how it is functioning as a discourse marker, however, can be tricky. Britt Erman comments that the function of discourse markers is “monitoring discourse and conversation in various ways” (1339). Müller quotes a book written by Deborah Schiffrin titled *Discourse Markers* in which Schiffrin says that “Discourse markers provide contextual coordinates for utterances: they index an utterance to the local contexts in which utterances are produced and in which they are to be interpreted” (8). Michael McCarthy says that “the key function of discourse markers is that they signal the receiver, independently of content, what is happening, where the discourse is, where it is going, whether it has finished.... They are therefore a system of management of what is said or written”

(172). In her PhD dissertation for the University of Birmingham, Caroline Tagg claims that “discourse markers reflect a speaker’s engagement with, and construction of, the unfolding interaction” (105). In practical terms, then, discourse markers guide understanding through otherwise semantically meaningless words. They put subjects in relation to one another, show the speaker’s relation to the subject, and guide how the hearer should understand (Tagg 105). Among specific functions, discourse markers can open and close interactions, monitor conversation shifts, define topic boundaries, and focus attention as the speaker directs (Tagg 105).

This monitoring or organizing function of discourse markers is why we intuitively assume removing *oh* from an utterance would change its meaning. Without the context of the text message quoted above, it is difficult to tell exactly what the speaker intends, but we can tell that “oh” was inserted, either consciously or subconsciously, to communicate an emotion, intention, or attitude that would not have been present otherwise. This is the simplest explanation of a discourse marker’s function: to aid the receiver of an utterance in interpreting an unspoken aspect of that utterance or to manage the utterance through non-semantic methods.

The text message above serves as an example of many of these functions. As previously noted, because we do not have the surrounding context for this message, it is difficult to assert exactly what functions *oh* takes. However, all the possible functions of *oh* are, in fact, functions that discourse markers take. First, *oh* could be conveying a specific unspoken meaning from the sender such as surprise at a misunderstanding or withdrawal and embarrassment to appease the receiver’s anger at the misunderstanding. On the other hand, *oh* could be functioning by managing the discourse—either by placing this text message beneath the previous one to soften a

misunderstanding or to signal that the originator of this text message wants to end the discussion about this topic.

Obviously, context is extremely important to discerning how a discourse marker functions. Because one of the major functions of discourse markers is to organize and manage discourse, the context in which they appear is essential to understanding their role in conveying meaning. Without sufficient context, as is the case in trying to analyze the above text message, the purpose of the discourse marker in an utterance shatters into a plethora of possibilities.

Due to its varied functions, the discourse marker is one of the least specific grammatical categories. In her book *Discourse Markers in Native and Non-native English Discourse*, Simone Müller explains that discourse markers have few absolute characteristics, but a surplus of traits preceded by the qualifiers “often” or “mostly” (4). Discourse markers are not composed of a single word class, have no distinct phonological features or syntactic position, lack semantic content, are usually multifunctional, and occur almost exclusively orally (Müller 5-8). Most important to Müller, however, is that discourse markers have what she calls “syntactic independence and grammatical optionality” (5-6). As the terms imply, this characteristic refers to the fact that discourse markers can be removed from a sentence without rendering it unintelligible or even altering its grammar. Discourse markers as such are outside the syntax of a sentence (Müller 5-6). Müller claims that “optionality...is the only [characteristic], in my opinion, which can be used to distinguish, for example, between discourse markers and their non-discourse marker homonyms” (6). For instance, it is by grammatical optionality and syntactic independence that the word *right*, used as a discourse marker, can be differentiated from *right* meaning “correct” or “the opposite of left.” The most obvious discourse markers in

English, words such as “oh” and “you know,” fit these characteristics with few exceptions (McCarthy 173).

One of Müller’s proposed characteristics that should also be discussed further is discourse markers’ lack of semantic content. Many researchers claim, as scholar Britt Erman does, that discourse markers have “little or no meaning in themselves and can only be understood either through clues in the context and/or situation, or else by having a conventionalized pragmatic meaning mapped onto them.” (Erman 1339). While Müller claims that “lack in this case is not meant to imply complete absence of meaning,” most researchers focus on how the markers add interpretational meaning instead of informational meaning (Müller 6). This claim is reasonable considering the kind of words that typically are discourse markers in English: *oh, you know, well, so*, etc. These words do not often carry semantic content even when being used in other functions. I believe, however, that certain words functioning as discourse markers—such as various forms of e-laughter—can also carry semantic meaning. This idea will be revisited later.

Another of Müller’s key characteristics that merits further discussion for this study is orality. Müller acknowledges that there are some linguists that reject this criterion completely and others that cling to it with the full range of opinions in between. In a study titled “Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken and Written Narratives,” Deborah Tannen points out that some “features that have been associated exclusively with one or the other mode, upon closer analysis, are found in both” (3). Most studies surrounding discourse markers, however, still use primarily spoken data for analysis (Müller 7). Müller references McCarthy, who was discussed earlier, and points out that he uses discourse markers as a metric determining how “spoken” a text is (McCarthy 170; Müller 7). In the article “Pragmatic Markers Revisited with a Focus on You

Know in Adult and Adolescent Talk,” Britt Erman says that discourse markers “are all restricted to spoken language (or mimetic dialogue) and some have functions that come close to e.g. those of punctuation or paragraphing in written texts” (1339). Intuitively, the orality of discourse markers should be expected as they are a means to create intimacy, and in turn informality, between the sender and receiver of a message (McCarthy 175-178). Informality, then, is commonly associated with closer, spoken language while being less “correct” than written language (Sinclair 4). Despite this research, there are many instances of discourse markers in CMIC, which arguably makes them more worthy of consideration because of their unusual context.

Words that typically function as discourse markers appear in text messaging more often than in other forms of writing. In the corpus used in this study which contains over four thousand text messages, the word *oh* appeared 111 times; *well* appeared 120 times. While this may not seem to be very often in a rather large corpus, when compared with other typical written works, the numbers are quite significant. For instance, Dale Carnegie’s self help book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* of 213 pages contains *oh* twice and *well*, as it appears in all its usages, a mere twenty times. This, however, should not be surprising considering we have already concluded that text messaging is a middle ground between writing and speaking. With text messaging acting so much like spoken conversation, it is natural to see discourse markers, which usually appear in speech, to appear frequently in text messages. The function of discourse markers in text messaging, however, differs slightly from their function in speech. These differences arise from the characteristics that text messaging shares with writing discussed earlier.

One of the most important differences is that when discourse markers appear in text messaging, and whenever they are used in written language, they are “contrived” (Tagg 103). In speech, discourse markers are often used to produce language quickly and to fill silent space. Speakers use them when searching for the right words or amending something previously said. Text messaging, however, has no need of these time sensitive amendments; a person typing a text message can simply go back and change what they have written. And yet, discourse markers still show up in text messages, functioning in a similar way as they do in speech. Caroline Tagg comments on this idea, saying, “In speech, discourse markers such as *oh...* may be used unconsciously as speakers search for words to organize what they want to say...texters consciously reproduce these features of speech as they construct close relationships through texting” (103). Tagg goes on to say that when discourse markers are used in text messages, they are present to show the orality and “conversational intimacy” of the situation (105). In addition to all their other functions (which Tagg acknowledges), she claims that when these words are used in text messaging, they evoke speech by using typical speech patterns and word choice (Tagg 105). This agrees with McCarthy’s claim that discourse markers can be used as a metric to measure the orality of an utterance. In fact, discourse markers are one of the main elements that swings text messaging towards the side of speech instead of writing.

3. E-laughter

Discourse markers, as we have seen, appear often in text messaging as well other instances of CMIC as the sender attempts to evoke speech and aid the receiver of the message in interpretation in the same way that tone of voice or body language would supply this in speech (Varnhagen et al.). Because there is no definite set of discourse markers, new words or phrases

can be used in this way and become part of the recognized body of commonly accepted discourse markers. In this paper, I argue that e-laughter in CMIC is often used as a discourse marker and should be viewed and studied as such. While this claim has occasionally been made both explicitly and implicitly, it has seldom received further analysis. E-laughter, however, presents some issues as it also carries semantic content and functions in other ways in CMIC. We will explore these issues and how e-laughter is used in the following sections.

The term e-laughter is used to refer to any acronym or onomatopoeia that represents laughter used on the internet or in other computer mediated communication (such as text messaging). In English, the most common forms of e-laughter are *lol*, *hahaha*, *hehehe*, etc. In other languages, however, laughter is “spelled” differently. In French, the acronyms *mdr* and *ptdr*, representing a French phrase that loosely translates to “my sides are bursting with laughing,” are used alongside *lol* to express laughter (Uygur-Distexhe 239). In Spanish, *jejeje* is used for *hehehe*, and *jajaja* means *hahaha*. Many teenagers and young adults intuitively and from experience will interpret these forms of e-laughter differently based on the sender and the context the message appears in, whether a text message or a Twitter post.

Given the above definition of e-laughter, one might wonder if emojis fit into this category. While the study of emojis—letter sized digital icons use in CMIC—was outside the scope of my research, there is an argument to be made that emojis depicting laughter can be designated as e-laughter even though they are pictures and not spelled out representations of laughter. Whether emojis function in the same way as e-laughter—that is, as discourse markers—has not been extensively discussed in scholarship. Li Li and Yue Yang in their article “Pragmatic Functions of Emoji in Internet-Based Communication— a Corpus-Based Study”

examine emoji function and indicate that emojis are “qualifier[s] of the text message” (3). The authors also discuss the specific functions of emojis, many of which align with the functions of discourse markers (3). While emojis certainly seem to fall into the categories of both e-laughter and discourse marker, the study of emojis is still a wide open field in need of additional research as their use and number expand.

E-laughter, with a definition limited to spelled out representations of laughter, has a substantial amount of scholarship dedicated to it— given its relatively short existence. Outside strictly scholarly research, Facebook did a study using published posts from their users that outlined the distribution of e-laughter by gender, age, city of residence, state of residence, number of e-laughs used in a single post, and letters used within the e-laughter (Adamic and Develin). In an article for the online news source *The Daily Dot*, Selena Larson used Facebook’s data to trace the decline of acronyms like *lol* in favor of other forms of e-laughter such as *hahaha* (Larson). While these studies did not yield any information useful for this project (as it was mostly raw, statistical data), the very fact that e-laughter is being discussed outside the academic arena shows that even laypeople are noticing e-laughter as a significant element of online communication.

Other articles published in news sources and not scholarly journals continue to claim that *lol* is no longer used strictly to represent laughter. These articles trace the history and development of e-laughter and indirectly make the claim that it is currently being used as a discourse marker. Scholarly articles that discuss the history and development of e-laughter either do not exist or were unavailable to me for the purposes of this project. Peer reviewed research that traces the development of e-laughter through data sets and corpora instead of intuitive and

personal experience would be a useful addition to this body of literature. However, I did not have the resources to complete such a study and must leave that other to researchers.

However, the history of *lol* that has been traced through credible news sources is worth examining. In May of 2015, the *Washington Post* released an article titled “The surprisingly long, unfunny history of ‘LOL’” which cited a few of the sources used in this project and presented studies that also claim that “haha” and “hehe” have been used for many years, even in texts such as Chaucer and Shakespeare (Collister). The author then claims that while these forms of e-laughter often represent physical laughter in response to a joke, acronyms such as *lol* are not being used literally (Collister). The article quotes John McWhorter, a linguist cited elsewhere in this project: “And another linguist, John McWhorter, pointed out that LOL has changed from indicating real laughter to a signal of ‘basic empathy between testers’ — in other words, a sign that you have read and acknowledged the message...much in the same way we might use a short laugh or a nod in face-to-face conversation” (Collister). Another news article published by BBC only a few months later, in August of 2015, claims that, while the origins of *lol* can be traced back to the 1980s, it is losing popularity in favor of other forms of e-laughter such as “hahaha” and even emojis (Tam). A much more recent article published in November 2020 by the news source Nerdist quotes linguist Gretchen McCulloch, the author of *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, as commenting on *lol* in this way: “LOL is very functional. It expresses something that didn’t quite have a way of being expressed before in writing in an obvious sort of way” (Gooden). The author also describes McCulloch as characterizing *lol* as sending important messages to the sender that are otherwise unstated, which may sound familiar as the main purpose of discourse markers. The Nerdist also quoted then PhD

student Rachel Elizabeth Weissler as commenting on how *lol* has lost of its connection to literal laughter: “I don’t even know if LOL is even used in the place of actual laughing anymore. But when you...think about written language, it tries to accommodate paralinguistic features. What that means is that you want to convey emotion or convey affect, but that’s more difficult to do in writing than it is in spoken language” (Gooden). Weissler goes on to say that *lol* can function as a softener in such occasions as writing someone off or addressing a serious topic; it serves to lighten the mood (Gooden).

For the purposes of this study, I propose that certain forms of e-laughter—I will look particularly at *lol*—are being used in function as discourse markers while also carrying residue of the semantic content of laughter within their container messages. This latter claim has not been put forward to my knowledge. I intend to prove that *lol* is functioning as a particularly potent discourse marker because of its origins in laughter, even though it does not always carry with it a direct connection to laughter. The first claim, that e-laughter is a discourse marker, has been put forth in the past. Multiple scholarly articles published on this topic have linked e-laughter with discourse markers in function if not in name. In the article “Hahaha”: Laughter as a Resource to Manage WhatsApp Conversations,” published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, authors Cécil Petitjean and Etienne Morel studied the frequency, use, and most importantly placement of e-laughter in WhatsApp conversations, an instant messaging app. In their paper, they indirectly claim that *lol* is functioning as a discourse marker:

Focusing on the position of laughter in the message, its sequential position, and the management of turn allocation before and after the message containing laugh particles, we point out that participants methodically organize laughter as a way of managing

interactional moments that are particularly delicate, especially in asynchronous conversations: that is, message-taking and sequence closing/topic termination. (Petitjean and Morel)

Not only do Petitjean and Morel say here that e-laughter is being used in “sequence closing” and “topic termination,” which are both characteristics of discourse markers discussed above, they found that participants used e-laughter “as a way of managing interactional moments that are particularly delicate.” This is exactly the function of discourse markers. In a previously referenced study, Tagliamonte and Denis say that “...although initially standing for ‘laugh out loud’, [*lol*] is used by our participants in the flow of conversation as a signal of interlocutor involvement, just as one might say mm-hmm in the course of a conversation” (11). Again, this description, applied to *lol* here, could be used to perfectly describe the function of a discourse marker.

A final source that came to my attention is the previously mentioned study by Deniz Uygur-Distexhe titled “*Lol*, *Mdr* and *Ptdr*: An Inclusive and Gradual Approach to Discourse Markers.” In this study done using a French corpus of text messages, Uygur-Distexhe evaluates *lol*, *mdr*, and *ptdr* as discourse markers and attempts to prove through quantifiable terms that these acronyms function as such (240). Uygur-Distexhe concludes that in his corpus these instances of e-laughter were often used as discourse markers, with 88.34% of the occurrences of *lol* being used in the function of a discourse marker (Uygur-Distexhe 253). Uygur-Distexhe arrived at his conclusions through syntactic positioning and integration as well as semantic opacity and meaning (247, 250). While the study did yield conclusive results, Uygur-Distexhe acknowledged an amount of uncertainty in the analysis of texting “because of the constraints of

the SMS corpus and of SMS language in itself” (259). Uygur-Distexhe’s approach to discourse markers and texting in general is relevant to this study, but unfortunately I was unable to replicate it in regard to my corpus because of limitations to be further discussed later. However, despite Uygur-Distexhe’s conclusions that certain kinds of e-laughter can indeed function as discourse markers, it is still necessary to discuss this conclusion in relation to the English corpus used in this study.

4.1 Research Intentions and Limitations

When initially planning a research process for this study, I intended to use text messaging as my primary data set to analyze. When I was made aware of an open-source corpus of text messages, I intended to base this entire project on analysis of those text messages. However, because these messages are singular and not part of a continuous conversation, it proved very difficult to make rhetorical claims with any amount of certainty. Without conversational context, the corpus did not provide enough data to add to existing research or to make well supported claims. For this reason, I expanded my research to include a rhetorical analysis of threads on Twitter, another form of CMIC, that provided me with adequate conversational context. Despite this, the text messages in the corpus still proved somewhat useful in linguistic analysis and some very limited rhetorical analysis. I have chosen a limited number of text messages from the corpus with analysis to include here in support of the linguistic claim that e-laughter often functions as a discourse marker.

4.2 The Corpus

The corpus of text messages used in this study was compiled by Tiago A. Almeida, José María Gómez, and Akebo Yamakami to aid in the development of computer software that filters

spam text messages (messages from advertisers akin to junk email). Their paper outlining the analysis of and experiments they ran on this corpus can be found at <http://www.dt.fee.unicamp.br/~tiago/smsspamcollection/>. The corpus is open source, meaning available to the public for research purposes. I have chosen to use this corpus for this study because it was accessible and usable with little alteration. Because text messages are private correspondence, they are notoriously difficult to obtain for research purposes. In addition to this, the time restraints that I had for this project made it impractical for me to collect my own data. This is one of the only completely open-source text message datasets. As is outlined in their paper, Almeida et. al. used this corpus to run tests using machine learning to see if certain spam filtration systems would identify and discard the spam and leave the legitimate messages. This could only be accomplished by the programs' identifying word usage in the legitimate messages that was not present in the spam messages. The study did not yield conclusive results, but set the groundwork for other studies of computer engineering to build upon.

The corpus itself originally contained 5,574 messages, 4,827 of which were legitimate and 747 were spam. It was provided in multiple formats, all of which placed each text message on a separate line. None of the text messages are known to be continuous conversations but are all individual messages with no surrounding data. Accordingly, any previous or subsequent messages are unavailable for analysis. Because of this, the scope of conclusions which could be drawn from this corpus is significantly lessened. This lack of context poses a large problem for linguistic and rhetorical research which will be more thoroughly explored later.

For this corpus to be of any use for linguistic analysis, the spam messages scattered among the legitimate ones had to be removed. In the format that the corpus is available to the

public, one of the text (.txt) files labels each message as either spam or ham (legitimate). Using a program coded with the programming language python to differentiate between the legitimate messages and the spam messages, the former messages were placed into a new file and the latter were discarded. In this way, I was able to filter out the original 747 spam messages, leaving only the legitimate messages useful for analysis. All following statistics are based on the filtered corpus containing only the 4,827 legitimate messages.

The corpus contains 70,010 words in total with an average of 14.39 words per message. These words make up a total of 350,024 characters with an average of 72.51 characters per message. I will periodically make reference to the entire filtered corpus, but most of this study makes use of the 78 messages that contained the acronym *lol*. These statistics were also computed using python scripts.

Besides the problem caused by the lack of continuous conversations, another issue with using this open-source corpus was the source of the messages, i.e., the unknown first language, age, culture, etc. of participants that submitted the messages. Almeida et. al. provided some information about the source of the messages in their corpus. Of the 4,827 legitimate messages, 3,375 were selected at random from the National University of Singapore SMS Corpus, which is a dataset of over ten thousand legitimate messages collected by the University of Singapore mostly from Singaporeans and largely from students attending the university who were made aware that the data would be released to the public. An additional 405 messages were collected from research done by Caroline Tagg recorded in her PhD dissertation “A Corpus Linguistic Study of SMS Text Messaging” completed at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, in 2009. Tagg collected her data personally through the networking of largely British friends and

family. Tagg's dissertation can be publicly accessed at <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/253/1/Tagg09PhD.pdf>. Her dissertation, as well as her book, *The Discourse of Text Messaging: Analysis of SMS Communication*, published in 2012 has been previously referenced.

The final 1,002 legitimate messages were collected from SMS Spam corpus v.0.1 Big from which Almeida et. al. also collected a portion of their spam messages. The source of this corpus is the Grumbletext website and the NUS Corpus. Since the NUS Corpus was used originally and through the Grumbletext site, there is a possibility, though slim, of repeated legitimate messages. Even with this information about the origin of the messages, the varying countries the text messages came from was still an issue as the English spoken in Singapore is vastly different from the English spoken in the United Kingdom. I was unable to tell from looking at the text messages which ones were from which country. While the various forms of English used has the potential to causes problems, I was not able to identity any that appeared in this analysis. This, in addition to the lack of context, is another limitation with using a corpus like this one.

4.3 E-Laughter as a Discourse Marker in this Corpus

As we have already seen, many researchers argue that some forms of e-laughter function as discourse markers, but it is still necessary to examine the corpus used in this study and its various forms of e-laughter to see if their conclusion holds true. Attempting to prove the function of a linguistic feature can be challenging because the criteria for the category are not always quantifiable or objective. Uygur-Distexhe's methods in proving that e-laughter functioned as a discourse marker involved quantifiable metrics; however, his conclusions could be challenged based on a different opinion regarding how he measured his data. For instance, while Uygur-

Distexhe might claim that one text message has opaque semantic meaning, another researcher might argue it has figurative semantic meaning. Thus, there is some subjectivity. That being said, Uygur-Distexhe's methods appear sound, and I am not aware of any who challenge them. For my purposes, I unfortunately cannot replicate his methods in proving that instances of e-laughter are discourse markers in my corpus. In place of quantifiable analysis, then, I will examine several instances of e-laughter in this corpus and analyze whether the acronyms are functioning as discourse markers individually. I will look at instances that seem clear one way or the other and at some that are more difficult to categorize. I will be using some of Uygur-Distexhe's terms about syntactic positioning and semantic meaning when it is useful and applicable. Noting which instances of e-laughter are discourse markers and which are not allows for further analysis surrounding those that are discourse markers and those similar in usage.

To begin our analysis of the text messages, we will start with this message:

(28) *Lol yeah at this point I guess not*

With eight words, this text message is less than half the length of the average message in this corpus and is more cryptic than others because there are no references to anything specific. According to Uygur-Distexhe's terms of syntactical positioning, this acronym is in the initial position, at the very beginning of the sentence (248). While the lack of context indicators is frustrating when attempting analysis, this vagueness does point out that this message is "speech like." While written discourse is typically decontextualized (the reader does not have to fill in any gaps because connections are made explicit), spoken language is very contextualized (Tannen 3). This text message's leaning toward the side of speech in its mode shows that it may be more likely to contain other speech-like elements such as discourse markers. Examining the

message itself, we can see that there is probably at least one discourse marker present; the word *yeah*. An affirming particle, *yeah* is informing the receiver of the sender's opinion and guiding their understanding. It is not syntactically necessary to the grammar of the sentence and is apparently not referring to the same event that the sender guesses will not be happening. Instead of responding to the previous message's content, *yeah* is responding to the previous message's sender and showing that this sender agrees with their opinion. If we take this perspective, then *lol* is much more likely to be a discourse marker due to co-occurrences. Uygur-Distexhe examined co-occurrence ratios in his study and found that *lol* occurred as a discourse marker along with other discourse markers more frequently than the other e-laughters studied (257).

With this in mind, let us turn to examine *lol* in the message. The closest we can come to definitely determining if *lol* is being used here as a discourse marker is to see whether it is conveying something other than laughter. In this message, *lol* could be present to represent literal laughter; there is no way to tell for sure. The question becomes if this instance falls into either of Uygur-Distexhe's semantic categories of figurative (underlying comic or ironic element in a message) or opaque (having no relation to laughter) (250). Either of these options would signal that *lol* is serving an additional function in the message, which would show it to be a discourse marker. A person who texts frequently would notice that if *lol* were removed from this message, the tone would shift significantly. Without *lol*, this message would sound disappointed; the e-laughter, however, shows that the sender is not upset about what the previous sender said. Thus, even if *lol* here is figurative in meaning, it still most likely functions as a signpost for the reader, guiding how they should understand what was said. It is relatively safe to assume that *lol* here is doing more than simply denoting laughter.

Here is another example of e-laughter from the corpus.

(47) *Lol u still feeling sick?*

This text message is also much shorter than many of the others with only five words. Another example of *lol* coming in the initial position, this instance of e-laughter is obviously responding to something that was said in a previous message. To have the best possible analysis here, I will attempt to show if *lol* is functioning in any other way besides denoting laughter. While a loose argument could be made that *lol* is functioning as an acknowledgment but softening of the question about sickness, there is so little context that this is impossible to say with any amount of certainty. This instance of e-laughter, then, is unknown. *Lol* could very well be functioning as a discourse marker, but there is not enough information to make a claim either way. Contrast this example with the following message.

(56) *Lol for real. She told my dad I have cancer*

This message also deals with sickness, and *lol* seems to be written in response to the previous message's content. While not having the previous message still makes analysis difficult, the presence of *for real* in this message helps enormously. The pairing of *for real* and *lol* creates a meaning that could be replaced with *I know, right?* This phrase is obviously functioning as a discourse marker as it shows the receiver that the sender of the phrase agrees with what is said to a greater extent than usual. *Lol for real* in this message functions to show the receiver exactly what the sender feels about what was said, giving more information than "I agree." *Lol*, in particular, probably carries figurative meaning, underlying a comic aspect in the previous message without representing literal laughter. It is also possible that *lol* is semantically opaque,

having nothing to do with laughter, but being used in conjunction with *for real* to illustrate anger at the ridiculousness of what was said in the previous message.

From analyzing these instances of e-laughter in the initial position, we have seen that instances of e-laughter that come at the beginning of a message seem to be responding to a previous message or to something outside the text of the message. Because of the lack of context surrounding these messages, it is difficult to make any definite claims about whether or not *lol* is functioning as a discourse marker. However, instances of e-laughter that occur in the middle of a message or near the end usually refer to something within their own message and thus can give more insight. While by no means certain, these messages can help give a better idea of whether and how often e-laughter functions as a discourse marker.

The e-laughter in this next message is still in the initial position. However, it is grouped here with other text messages in which e-laughter occurs in a final or isolated position. Because of this, it provides more insight than other initial position instances of e-laughter.

(44) *Good morning pookie pie! Lol hope I didn't wake u up*

While the e-laughter in this message is not at the beginning of the message, it is still in the initial position because it occurs after the end stop exclamation mark. In contrast to the messages examined above, *lol* in this message is not responding to a previous message from a different sender. We can claim this confidently because this is a good morning message, the beginning of the conversation. The acknowledgement that the receiver might be asleep reinforces this idea. We can conclude, then, that whatever function *lol* is taking in this text message, it is not referring to anything outside this singular text message. This information is very helpful in trying to analyze *lol*'s function. Based on the context in which it occurs, *lol* in this instance is probably not

literal laughter in response to something amusing. Waking up a friend or romantic partner is not usually a source of laughter. If literal laughter is involved, it is most likely a nervous, apprehensive laughter. However, *lol* here seems to have another more subtle function. By placing this instance of e-laughter before an acknowledgement of possible disturbance to the receiver, the sender is softening the message, signaling to the receiver that they are aware of the possibility of waking them up and are sorry if they did. In this way, *lol* is being used to convey information that could have been conveyed through tone of voice in a spoken conversation but would have necessitated a lengthy explanation in a written form. Besides giving the sender of this message a cushion of humor if the receiver is angry, the presence of the e-laughter also most likely functions to lessen the chance of the receiver being angry at being woken up. It is also possible that *lol* is referring to an absurd use of “pookie pie,” possibly in reference to a friend, and thus *lol* is acting as a discourse marker by pointing out that the endearment is meant to be humorous. It is safe to assume that the sender here did not think through these functions before sending this message, but that is often the case with grammar— many people know how to get across what they want without knowing how to describe it. In this text message, *lol* is guiding the receiver in how they should interpret the message, showing the sender’s attitude about the content, and thus functioning as a discourse marker.

As previously mentioned, messages that contain e-laughter in a final or isolated position are usually easier to analyze without context because the e-laughter is referring to something within the container message. Consider this message:

- (4) *Especially since i talk about boston all up in my personal statement, lol! I woulda changed that if i had realized it said nyc! It says boston now.*

The e-laughter in this message, while in the middle of a message, is in a syntactically final position within its sentence. It seems that the sender of this message meant for *lol* to be in reference to the mistake in cities on their personal statement. In contrast to the previously examined messages, this one is rather straightforward. *Lol* here is figurative, probably not representing literal laughter but emphasizing the comic and/or ironic nature of what was said. In addition to this, it is likely that the sender placed *lol* in this text to let the receiver know that the former sees this as humorous. Without *lol*, this message could be read with a disappointed or upset tone. In this way, *lol* is acting as a discourse marker by taking the place of tone of voice in spoken conversation that alerts the receiver to the sender's attitude about what is said. Another message with e-laughter positioned similarly is this.

(5) *Sorry about earlier. Putting out fires. Are you around to talk after 9? Or do you actually have a life, lol!*

Similar to the last message, the function of this *lol* is fairly simple to determine. While it is not exactly clear if this instance of e-laughter is representing literal or figurative laughter, it is clear that *lol* is present to show that the final comment is supposed to be taken as a joke. While the sender may or may not be laughing at the receiver's not having a life, *lol* is acting as a helper in interpreting for the receiver. This, again, is the definition of a discourse marker: to help the receiver of an utterance understand it in the way that the originator intended.

Unfortunately, the syntactic position of e-laughter does not always mean that its function is easy to decipher. Take this message for instance:

(62) *We got a divorce. Lol. She's here*

Intriguing content aside, without context there is no way to tell what the sender of this message meant when they used *lol*. Are they laughing about it? Do they want to make the receiver more comfortable? Is it an inside joke? It may very well be the case that *lol* here is being used as a discourse marker, but without surrounding messages it is impossible to say for sure.

Syntactically, this *lol* is isolated because it is both preceded and followed by an end stop punctuation mark. Another such message is below.

(66) *Ahhh. Work. I vaguely remember that! What does it feel like? Lol*

The e-laughter in this message is final (at the end of the message) but is also isolated because it is outside the ending question mark. However, its function is on the easier side to discern. Being used in a semantically figurative sense, the *lol* in this message is likely present to underline the intended humor in the comment. The sender is not intending to offend the receiver but to make a joke. Again, *lol* is functioning as a discourse marker by guiding the interpretation of the message. This is also an instance of co-occurrence of discourse markers, as *Ahhh* in the initial position can be argued to be a discourse marker as well. One last message that falls into this category is the following.

(72) *Oh dang! I didn't mean o send that to you! Lol!*

This message, much like previous messages, offers some context for analysis because *lol* is isolated at the end of the message. This *lol*, much like others, is most likely functioning in multiple ways. The mistaken sending of a message to the wrong recipient may very well be humorous or ironic. However, it is also very possible that *lol* is alerting the receiver that the sender sees this as a mistake and requests the receiver not to be angry about it. Thus it is very

likely that this instance of e-laughter is functioning as a discourse marker, possibly in addition to other functions.

The analysis of these messages confirms what has previously been shown in other studies: that *lol* can function as a discourse marker, a signpost for the receiver of the message to aid in interpretation of content and the sender's attitude towards the content. However, as we have seen, there are some messages in this corpus which cannot be fully analyzed due to the lack of accessibility to surrounding messages. While I cannot make any quantifiable claims such as those made by Uygur-Distexhe, I can say that many of the instances of *lol* are functioning in the same way that he observed. This conclusion allows us to further investigate how *lol* is functioning in these messages and whether there is anything to glean to advance research on this topic.

5.1 Introduction to Semantic Residue in E-laughter

Now that we have seen that *lol* is, in fact, used as a discourse marker in this corpus, I will attempt to comment on how it is functioning semantically. Semantics is the branch of linguistics that is concerned with what words mean. The previously mentioned scholar Simone Müller included in her list of characteristics for discourse markers that they contained little or no semantic content (Müller 6). Britt Erman also makes the claim that discourse markers have “no meaning in themselves and can only be understood...through clues in the context” (1339). We saw in our own analysis of a text message from this corpus which uses the word *oh* that discourse markers rarely contain meaning of any kind. However, in this study we are dealing with e-laughter. Not originating as a discourse marker but as another part of speech, *lol* carries meaning: laughter. It is quite probable that *lol* originally denoted literal laughing out loud, but as

it has morphed into different functions, its standing as a rhetorical device has also changed. In Uygur-Distexhe's study, he extensively discusses semantics in relation to e-laughter, but he does not directly acknowledge this break from traditional discourse marker characteristics. Excluding his study, I am not aware of any other work that makes the claim that *lol*, when functioning as a discourse marker, can also carry semantic content within the sentence.

Because we have seen that traditional definitions of discourse markers have included the negative attribute of lacking semantic content, we can then ask whether this excludes *lol* completely and puts it and other forms of e-laughter in some other category. The simple answer to this is no because, if viewed inclusively, discourse markers can be any part of speech. Uygur-Distexhe gives a definition that hints at this idea. "Broadly speaking, discourse markers could be any linguistic element which is multifunctional, which relates to the communicative situation, and which expresses attitudes and emotions (C. Bazzanella 2006: 449)" (243). While Uygur-Distexhe does give some guidelines on how to define discourse markers, his inclusive view shows that discourse markers should be included if they fall into his categories and not excluded if they function in other ways. Thus, e-laughter should not be excluded if it carries semantic content as long as it functions as a discourse marker as well. Discourse markers have long been believed to carry some semantic meaning in directing the receiver, but no studies that I am aware of claim that a word functioning as a discourse marker has meaning that would fall outside its discourse marker function.

The semantic meaning of *lol* comes from the origins of the acronym, literal laughing out loud, which, as we saw earlier in the history of e-laughter, has almost completely faded. While this semantic meaning is no longer always used, the connection between *lol* and laughter

remains. The semantic residue of laughter still exists within the acronym and contributes to the meaning of a message.

5.2 Rhetorical Function of Literal Laughter

Before we begin analysis of traces of semantic meaning left in *lol* from laughter, we need to understand what semantic function we are searching for. The traces of meaning that laughter leaves behind in acronyms such as *lol* are drawn from the rhetorical use of laughter in face-to-face conversation. There has been a large amount of research done on literal laughter from why people laugh to the way faces look when people laugh. For the purposes of this study, it is important to understand the way that laughter functions in a real conversation to be able to understand how its trace meaning remains in *lol* and is used by people online. Hopefully, with this information we can finally connect the function of literal laughter with the current research on discourse markers to claim that *lol* acts as a particularly potent discourse marker due to its origins in literal laughter.

The act of laughing is usually associated in the mind with humor. We laugh in reaction to a joke or a friend's tripping to fall in a puddle. But for most people, laughter is the response to a much wider range of emotions than humor (Szameitat et al, 397). Often, the response to emotions such as surprise, cheerfulness, anxiety, and even anger or aggression is laughter (Szameitat 397). J. J. M. Askenasy, in an article published in the *Journal of General Psychology* titled "The Functions and Dysfunctions of Laughter," claimed that laughter was the "sudden transformation of strained expectation into nothingness" (318). Another scholar, Phillip Glenn, in his book *Laughter in Interaction*, claimed that laughter is organized "with systematic sound-production features to which both laughers and other participants orient in the coordination of

their interactions” (44). Through this, we can see from research what we can observe in ourselves. Laughter is much more than a response to a punch line, but instead is a subtle and sophisticated utterance with a variety of meanings and uses.

One very relevant element of laughter for this study is that laughter is contrived. While occasionally laughter is uncontrollable, it is often inserted to accomplish at least a subconscious if not a conscious goal. One might laugh to cover over an awkward situation or as an easy transition to a different, perhaps more comfortable, subject or speaker. Glenn claims that laughter serves as a turn-taker signal; while one is laughing, others can prepare to begin speaking. Thus, laughter coordinates discourse (44). Jefferson et al. in their paper “Preliminary Notes on the Sequential Organization of Laughter” say that laughter can be and is often stopped upon the signal of another person, such as the beginning of speech (30). Much like discourse markers, laughter is not simply a filler for dead air, but a rhetorical device that we have subconsciously learned to use to our advantage in discourse.

Now that we understand that laughter is usually contrived as a rhetorical device, we can begin to unravel what laughter does in a conversation in hopes that these functions of laughter will help inform our understanding of *lol* in CMIC. One of the first rhetorical functions of laughter is as a recognition point. Jefferson et al. expounds upon this point, saying that laughter is “a token of understanding in a device for signaling ‘I see what you’re saying,’” much like the word “oh” or “yes” functions (15). In the same way, Glenn argues, “Laughing at a recognition point can display quick understanding of the laughable; it can also ensure prompt speaker transition with no gap, gaps constituting possible evidence of the failure of a laughable” (48). This claim equates laughter with the function of other discourse markers that we have already

discussed. This further shows that *lol* is a good candidate for a discourse marker. Other discourse markers, such as “yes,” have some intrinsic meaning, so it would make sense that people online looking for a tool to function as a discourse marker would choose a representation of something that already thus functioned in speech. We will see that laughter’s function as a point of recognition will contribute to the particularly effective use of *lol* as a discourse marker online. Another point that Jefferson et al. make is that laughter is always in reference to something so that someone might ask “what are you laughing at?” While this might seem unimportant, it does play a significant role in how laughter functions. People laugh in reaction or response to something; in other words, it is not isolated either from other people or utterances. The function of laughter that indicates conversation or connection will also be helpful in interpreting the use of *lol*.

Perhaps the most poignant of rhetorical uses that laughter possesses is a corollary to the point about laughing in reference to something else, and that is the effect of laughing together. First, initial laughter creates an invitation for further laughter. In *Laughter in Interaction*, Glenn says that “A first laugh provides opportunity, perhaps even encouragement, for another to join in laughing. A second laugh shows responsiveness and mutual ratification of a comic or ludic frame” (54). As a logical continuation of this idea, laughing together can confirm that there is no misunderstanding between interlocutors (Jefferson et al. 17). Glenn also notes that after one person has begun to laugh, “others can join in at any point without being heard as asynchronous or competing” (54). Laughing together communicates that there is not any competition or animosity between parties. Jefferson et al. speak about this idea of mitigating: “If the offensive materials can be subsequently treated as vehicles for amusement and participants can laugh by

reference to the amusement which the materials afford, then that may resolve the potential rupture and assure that no offense has been intended and none taken” (18). Thus laughter is being used to mitigate possible misunderstanding between parties. These results communicated by laughing together are perhaps one of the single largest elements of laughter that will serve us in our understanding of the use of *lol*.

5.3 Semantic Residue in Text Messages

If we believe that *lol* can function as a discourse marker and can also carry the residue of semantic content relevant to the sentence as a whole, the next question we must consider is how often this happens. Can *lol* still function as it was originally intended to— to denote literal laughter? Can it function as a discourse marker in a solely rhetorical fashion with no relationship to laughter whatsoever? To answer these questions, we must turn back to the text messages with this new focus mind. As is the case with many linguistic forms, *lol* does not always take on this double function of semantic container and discourse marker. There are still times that *lol* seems to be meant only in a literal sense: to show that something is funny. These messages are the best candidates for semantic meaning that is devoid of discourse marker function.

(55) *Lol! Oops sorry! Have fun.*

(31) *LOL that would be awesome payback.*

(33) *Waaaat?? Lololo ok next time then!*

None of the instances of *lol* in these messages would appear to have any function beyond denoting laughter as it is possible that the senders of these messages did not contrive these *lols* to communicate anything but the humor of the situation. Additionally, the instance of *Lololo* in the last text message indicates extreme humor, even though the acronym itself breaks down. On the

other hand, we see that *lol* can also be used solely as a discourse marker in a purely rhetorical function without any connection to laughter. Text messages such as these are the best options for such function.

(64) *Lol ... I knew that I saw him in the dollar store*

(74) *A lot of this sickness thing going round. Take it easy. Hope u feel better soon. Lol*

(The *lol* in the second of these text messages is either functioning as a purely rhetorical discourse marker or is intended to mean lots of love.) This use of *lol*, purely as a discourse marker, is much more seldom than its being used only to denote laughter. However, as is often the case in analyzing linguistic elements, it is difficult to make claims about meaning and/or the intention on the part of the originator of the utterance. Even in an instance when a researcher has access to context around a text message, judging intention and function is delicate and not an exact science.

While *lol* can be used individually as a semantic container or rhetorically as a discourse marker, it often takes on both functions. Let us take as an example a text message we have already analyzed.

(66) *Ahhh. Work. I vaguely remember that! What does it feel like? Lol*

We had said previously that *lol* is being used here to underline the humor in this message, to show that the sender is not intending to offend the receiver but merely to make a joke. In this way, *lol* is being used in the function of a discourse marker to guide the receiver's understanding. However, this function is fundamentally tied to the inherent meaning of *lol*. In contrast to usual discourse markers such as *oh* or *you know* that do not have inherent meaning, the meaning of laughter and humor in *lol* aids in the interpretation that it provides as a discourse marker. While

lol does not always have a direct connection to laughter in its use today, the residue of this semantic meaning remains and thus contributes to the meaning of the message. Because it has the multifunctionality of literal laughter, the semantic content of *lol* works in cooperation with its discourse marker function to create more subtle meaning in conversation. However, to see this function of *lol* in action, we must turn to a source that allows us to see the context of the message.

6. Analysis of E-laughter Used on Twitter

Twitter is an online social media service founded in 2006 that currently has over 200 million active users. In form, it resembles a combination of SMS and other social media platforms, such as Facebook (“Twitter”). Often known as mircoblogging, users send short messages, called tweets which are limited to 280 characters, onto their feed where their followers can see and reply to them (“Twitter”). Because users can follow topics as well as individuals, a conversation—called a thread—is often created from a single tweet that includes many users and replies to previous tweets. It is this conversational nature of Twitter that led me to use it in this project. Firstly, Twitter is a huge platform that records messages from real users which can be searched and accessed publicly. Essentially an open-source corpus that people continually add to, Twitter is an amazing resource for the researcher in search of data. Secondly, the character limit placed on Tweets contributes to their conversational nature and almost ensures that they can be included in CMIC, the same phenomenon that occurs in text messaging but not consistently in other forms of social media, such as Facebook. By sourcing messages and conversations from Twitter, I was able to find the context that I need for rhetorical analysis as well as practically unlimited data to sift through.

In this section, I will examine a number of tweets from threads begun by Chrissy Teigen, a self-labeled “de-motivational speaker” and wife of pop star John Legend. The tweets are a mixture of initial tweets made by Teigen and responses to her within the same thread. I have chosen to focus on Teigen’s Twitter not only because of her extensive use of *lol*, but also because she addresses such a wide variety of topics. From politics to recipes to discussion of her own miscarriage, Teigen’s Twitter provides a wide range of topics within which we can observe the function of *lol* both as a discourse marker and as a carrier of semantic residue.

To begin with an example of e-laughter from a personal, seemingly frivolous tweet, Teigen tweeted this on October 31, 2020, along with a mirror selfie video of herself dressed in a black dress for a date night.

@chrissyteigen: I have gotten used to my naturally frowny mouth. It’s kind of wild how much I laugh and smile and how it’s still frowny, no matter what lol

Teigen’s use of *lol* in this tweet allows us to make some observations about it and how it is being used. Firstly, it is fairly obvious that *lol* is functioning as a discourse marker here. In the video that accompanied this tweet, Teigen is by no means laughing. Neither does there seem to be anything that laughter would be in reference to. Instead, Teigen’s use of *lol* here seems to have a meaning closer to *not really* or *jk*. The e-laughter softens the message to show she is not distraught over her “frowny mouth.” It is signaling to the readers of this tweet her attitude towards the content. However, there is something more going on in this instance of *lol* than mere discourse marker function. Consider how the tweet would be different if Teigen had used another discourse marker, such as *not really* or *jk* instead of *lol*. Her attitude towards the message would still have been conveyed but in a much different tone. Neither of these other options would

convey as light-hearted of a meaning, and both would seem harsh and obvious. This is evidence that *lol* has an increased potency compared to other discourse markers because of its origins in laughter. Because *lol* used to mean laughter, the traces of that meaning remain to aid users in communicating their meaning. In this instance in particular, *lol* is retaining the function of laughter that invites receivers to recognize and react to something that is funny, and thus is aiding in the transmission of clearer meaning. However, focusing on a single initial tweet is little better than a text message with no content in terms of analysis, so we must turn to the conversation that was sparked for more insight.

The replies to this tweet were incredibly varied and used a great deal of e-laughter. Many of the responses were users saying they knew how she felt. Usernames are included here for accreditation purposes because Twitter is a public site. I have used colons to separate the usernames from the content of the tweet.

@Joey_Nevada: I got one too. The difference is my face at rest looks like I'm gonna rip someone's head off! Remember crowds? People would part like the Red Sea when I walked through. My wife and daughter loved it cause it made getting through them easy. LOL!

@LineEmUpMakeup: Girl same! My hidden talent is seriously that I can make the upside down U with my mouth in a frown and it doesn't get much better when my face is at rest lol

There are many other replies that express the same ideas as these do, many of which also use e-laughter. Looking at the discourse marker function of these instances of *lol* first, we can say with confidence that they are indeed acting as discourse markers. *Lol* here guides the reader in how to

interpret the message, much like the discourse marker *Right?* would function in this same example. It is at this point of analysis, however, that things become complicated in trying to separate the discourse marker function of *lol* from its residual semantic meaning. Because of the connection of *lol* to laughter, it is performing functions in these message that no other discourse marker could. These users have shifted the reference point of their e-laughter— an element *lol* retains from literal laughter— from their own “frowny” mouths to the fact that they share this characteristic with Teigen. These instances of e-laughter are also emphasizing that the senders understand Teigen’s feeling; this recognition point of understanding is also derived from literal laughter’s trace meaning that is left in *lol*. By retaining the rhetorical uses of laughter while no longer always meaning literal laughter, *lol* has an advantage over other discourse markers in its uses and versatility.

Many of the responses to this initial tweet were expressing how pretty Teigen was or how much they liked the shape of her mouth she had pointed out. One such response was this.

@dizzeebaby1: Girl u r pretty get out that mirror n stop picking on your self lol. U pouty lips r cute.

This response differs from the ones above both in content and in the use of *lol*. Obviously, *lol* here is further from literal laughter than it was in the previous examples. The sender’s admonition to Teigen to stop being so hard on herself is less likely to cause laughter in a face-to-face conversation than the similarities pointed out in the previous tweets. The discourse marker function of this *lol*, then, is most likely the same as Teigen’s initial tweet: to soften the message and show that, while the sender means what they say, it is not as serious as it might sound.

Telling off a celebrity for being hard on themselves could be construed as aggressive and

forward, but the presence of *lol* shows that the sender means no offense. This discourse marker function is not exclusive to *lol* and could be accomplished using a different discourse marker. The question, then, becomes why the sender used *lol* instead of another discourse marker. Most likely, this is due to the residual meaning of laughter remaining in *lol*. As we have already seen, literal laughter encourages more laughter; it seems the same thing is happening here. Instead of using another discourse marker to show that she is not completely serious, the sender chose *lol*, thereby gaining the additional function of being more closely connected with Teigen's tweet by joining in her laughter. This idea of laughter-causing-laughter will be revisited as tweets that contain e-laughter often have responses with e-laughter.

In contrast to some of Teigen's personal content, she also often tweets about politics. On November 7, 2020, after the election results had been published that Joe Biden had defeated Donald Trump, Teigen tweeted a mocking audio recording, pretending to complain about winning. She then replied to herself with this tweet.

@chrissyteigen: please tag the ex president I'm still blocked lol

This tweet called for Teigen's followers to tag Donald Trump on the post so that he would see her post. Many people responded by tagging Donald Trump and adding comments as well. This instance of *lol* is much closer to laughter than the any of the previous examples. Teigen is laughing at/making fun of the fact that Trump is the "ex president." There is, however, some discourse marker function in this *lol* as well. It is possible that Teigen is using *lol* to convey her attitude about being blocked: she is not seriously offended but instead thinks it funny. The reference point for this instance of *lol* is tricky but is probably the double humor of being blocked by a man who is now also the "ex-president." This kind of message serves as a good

example of how interwoven discourse marker function of *lol* is with its trace meaning of laughter.

Multiple responses to this tweet contained e-laughter that functioned in a variety of ways and took advantage of different elements of *lol*. One reply read this way.

@maeinthemiddle: Wasn't he like legally told to unblock you lol

This user is correct that politicians are not legally allowed to block followers from official political accounts. This is not intuitively a funny comment as it involves illegal activity, but this user still includes *lol*. There are multiple possibilities for both discourse marker function and residual semantic content in this instance of *lol*. It is likely that this user is employing *lol* as a discourse marker to signal that she agrees with Teigen's humorous/condescending attitude toward her being blocked. It is also possible that this user is borrowing the reference points that Teigen used for *lol* in her tweet, thus connecting one comment to the other through semantic meaning of laughter even though neither of those reference points appear in this tweet. Another tweet in response to Teigen's initial tweet was this.

@Savanna39803740: Pretty sure we can just call him Donald now right?? Lol

The *lol* in this tweet, in contrast to the previous one, seems to indeed be meant as humorous. In fact, its isolation outside ending punctuation seems to strengthen the theory that this *lol* is being used to show humor within its container message. However, this tweet still contains extra potency because its discourse marker function signals the sender's attitude toward its container message and the other messages around it. One last response to this political tweet looked like this.

@sharonm13590232: Lol

Tweets that only contain e-laughter are fairly common, at least five appearing in this thread alone. To make only a brief comment on them, it is important to notice both the discourse marker function and the semantic content left over from laughter. These isolated uses of *lol* can most definitely be argued to be discourse markers as they are showing agreement and that there is no misunderstanding or contradiction; they are signaling something that is not stated in words. However, they also have some of the leftover functions of literal laughter. Not only are they joining with the laughter already begun by Teigen and other earlier tweets, but they also have a recognition point of understanding— an element of both literal laughter and of discourse markers. No other discourse marker could function in all these ways at the same time with only the possible exception of *same* and other affirmative particles with more complex denotations more intricate than those of *yeah*. Besides these few possible exceptions, only *lol* (and other forms of e-laughter) with its origins in laughter is capable of this kind of meaning while standing on its own.

Besides politics, Teigen has also dealt with very personal topics on Twitter, including a miscarriage she suffered and posted about on September 30, 2020. Teigen dealt with this online in a variety of ways; in fact, many responses to the tweet discussed above about her “frowny mouth” assumed the comment was about her grief. One of the tweets that Teigen indirectly made about her miscarriage was on January 16, 2021. The tweet was posted along with a photo of a horse.

@chrissyteigen: My therapist says I need something that I do for just me, as I have absolutely nothing currently lol. Today begins my journey into the horse world. I hope this dude likes me [weary face emoji] he's so handsome and appears lazy, I love

Teigen's use of e-laughter in this tweet once again shows the double discourse marker and semantic function of *lol*. If the *lol* in this tweet represents laughter at all, it is self-deprecating laughter, referring to the fact that she does not have anything just for herself. Regardless of whether or not this is the case, *lol* still carries semantic meaning and functions based on its connections with laughter. While functioning as a discourse marker to signal the intended light heartedness of her comment, *lol* here is also very obviously contrived, as it falls in the middle of a sentence, another element of literal laughter. By retaining all these uses elements from literal laughter, *lol* functions as an important element that Teigen uses to attempt to keep this tweet from carrying an arrogant or self-pitying tone. Another instance of e-laughter that exemplifies this within this context is the below interaction that occurred on November 25, 2020.

@chrissyteigen: I'm not tweeting much because I'm honestly in a bit of a grief depression hole but do not worry as I have so much help around me to get better and I'll be fixed soon. they'll call when im better and ready for pickup and u can swing by and grab me ok? thank u and love you!

@crissles: feels like this was supposed to be a DM but i hope your healing process is moving along. [heart emoji]

@chrissyteigen: lol no I don't look in there it's a podcast-asking cesspool

Teigen's use of e-laughter in the last message illustrates another element of literal laughter that we have not yet mentioned in the use of *lol*. First, *lol* probably has some meaning of literal laughter in the comment above. It also is functioning as a discourse marker by showing the other user that Teigen understands and acknowledges the comment. Teigen's use of *lol* also communicates that she is changing the mood from serious to humorous. This is an element of

literal laughter: serving to dissipate serious conversations and to shift to a different topic.

Teigen's comment has nothing to do with the subject of grief in the previous tweets and thus *lol* is being used to shift the conversation elsewhere without seeming too abrupt. Only *lol*, as a discourse marker that retains some of its original semantic content, could accomplish all of these functions at the same time.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can see that *lol* has a much greater potency and variety of functions as a discourse marker because of its connection to laughter. The text messages as well as previous studies display clearly that, now, *lol* is mostly used as a discourse marker and rarely denotes literal laughter alone. However, the instances of *lol* on Twitter show that, even when it is not being used as literal laughter, *lol* still maintains many of the functions of literal laughter in face-to-face conversations and thus takes on more functions within an utterance than other discourse markers. It is important to understand, however, that people have caused *lol* to function in this way. This is not an unchanging linguistic function but instead a flexible rhetorical one that can and most likely will be altered in the future. Because of the fluid nature of claims made regarding how people use language, it is essential that this field of research continues to adapt as language adapts.

8. Possibilities for further research

While the research on e-laughter and CMIC in general has advanced considerably in the last decade, there is still plenty of work to do be. Perhaps the most important singular element to include in further research is the personal gathering of data and ability to talk to the originators of the messages and ask how they were using a particular element. The texting corpus examined

in this study, while somewhat useful, limited me in analysis because of the lack of context.

Similarly, although more surprising, my analysis of the conversational tweets was limited due to not being able to speak with the those who were tweeting. There are simply too many options for how an element like *lol* is functioning in very short messages to know for certain how it is being used. My suggestion to remedy this issue is that other researchers collect their own data as well as conduct interviews with the originators of the messages to ask how they use the specific linguistic element they are studying.

Regarding e-laughter specifically, there is room for linguistic and rhetorical research in corpora regarding what syntactic position it takes, in what context it appears, and how it changes function within those contexts. Rhetorically, multiple questions about e-laughter still remain:

1. To what degree do semantic elements of *lol* and its discourse marker function overlap?
2. Do other forms of e-laughter have the same dual function as *lol*?
3. Are different forms of e-laughter consistently used in different functions?
4. Do emojis have a discourse marker/semantic content function similar to e-laughter?
5. Is e-laughter used consistently or does it vary by location, race, gender, age, etc?
6. How can one use *lol* rhetorically online to their advantage and benefit?

These questions are just a sampling of the work that can still be done on this topic. The evolution of e-laughter is consistently developing and will continue to change and require more research to explain. If linguists and laymen alike want to keep up with the ever-changing language we hear and see on the internet, we should pay careful attention to e-laughter as it continues to shape online communication.

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