Laughing online: Investigating written laughter, language identity and their implications for language acquisition

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Abstract: Research in computer mediated communication and sociolinguistics, have increasingly highlighted the concept of establishing an “online identity” through specific language use. However, while emojis or common netspeak abbreviations are often the focus of research concerned with cyber language, no studies have considered the function laughter might play in establishing an online language identity. Furthermore, no studies have considered the possible significance of online laughter in terms of language acquisition. Researchers now have the opportunity to study laughter from a linguistic perspective since laughing online is illustrated through the use of emojis or typed text. The present study considers how the data and research in previous studies on written laughter and language identity can be combined to support arguments that laughing in a specific language online not only expresses the language identity of an individual, but should be considered an important aspect of second language acquisition.

Subjects: Internet Languages; Language & Linguistics; Sociolinguistics; Language & Communication

Keywords: language and identity; laughing online; online communication; sociolinguistics

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The present article is an exploratory study that considers the advantages of adding information concerning language-specific written laughter to language learning curricula. The online environment is growing at a rapid pace and is often used by language learners to interact with native speakers or other language students. The online environment is an environment that encourages interaction and communication, but the way communication takes place can be very specific and if a learner is unaware of certain linguistic features of online communication, they could feel very isolated and struggle to establish their online language identities. This research argues that linguistic features such as language-specific written laughter is often used in the online environment to express a language identity or to conform with a group of speakers and language learners should therefore be made aware of this in order to communicate effectively online.
1. Introduction

Laughter is often researched from a psychological perspective as an aspect of humour (Boyd, 2004; Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). However, various studies have attempted to investigate laughter from linguistic perspectives by focusing on corpus linguistics and laughter as well as laughter and politeness theory (Partridge, 2006), pragmatics and laughter (Chen, 2016) and the semantic script theory of humour as well as the general theory of verbal humour (Hadiati, 2018). Although laughter is usually a non-verbal aspect of speech and not a linguistic phenomenon, it can be analysed by applying linguistic methods and theories once laughter becomes a written or typed text (such as initialisms). McKay (2015) uses the term “written laughter” in her thesis investigating laughter on Twitter and the same term is used in the present study.

The aim of the present study is twofold. One aim is to explore whether written laughter can be considered a linguistic feature of online communication that expresses the users’ language identity. This approach has not been considered in previous research although written laughter has been researched on social media sites (McKay, 2015) and different forms of written laughter from various languages have been documented on blog posts and other internet sites (Garber, 2012; Hadjin, 2017; Ho, 2018; Linguisticator, 2018; McCann & Brandom, 2012; McCulloch, 2015). A second aim is to argue that the use of written laughter should be considered a potentially important aspect of second language acquisition.

The next three sections of this study are dedicated to elaborating on two important concepts that are central to the discussion, namely: (1) the concept of language and identity, and; (2) the concept of written laughter as an indicator of an individual’s online language identity.

1.1. Language and identity

Krauss and Chiu (1998, p. 41) emphasise that language pervades social life and is implicated in many of the phenomena central to social psychology including attitude change, social perception, stereotyping and personal identity. Furthermore, Krauss and Chiu (1998, p. 41) note that in the same way language use pervades social life, elements of social life also form an intrinsic part of the way language is used. Gee (2000, p. 99) specifically emphasises the importance of considering aspects of identity in education and notes that the term “identity” has taken on many different meanings in the literature. Nonetheless, throughout the literature, identity can be described as “someone being recognized as a certain kind of person, in a given context” (Gee, 2000, p. 99). This means that all individuals have multiple identities that are connected to both their internal states and their performances in society. Gee (2000) does not deny the existence of a core identity that is relatively stable across contexts, but emphasises that identity is constantly influenced by changes in the contemporary world. Block (2006) and Hozhabrossadat (2015) both support perspectives considering the dynamic nature of identity, with Block (2006) defining identity as “socially constructed, a self-conscious, ongoing narrative an individual performs, interprets and projects in dress, bodily movement, actions and language” (p. 39).

More importantly, Hozhabrossadat (2015, p. 195) emphasises that language is not a fixed concept either. Individual language identities are shaped by the plurality of linguistic codes since languages are used by different individuals and each language has its own variations, dialects, slangs and registers. This means that individuals’ language identities are defined differently in monolingual, bilingual and multilingual communities and that in each case language plays a varying role in assigning membership in a community of a specific language (Hozhabrossadat, 2015, p. 195). Furthermore, he (2015, p. 195) notes that when language identity directs individuals into membership of a community, it can either encourage solidarity and accommodativeness or lead to exclusion.

Researchers like Burke (2013) and De Costa and Norton (2016) also consider the importance of learners’ language identities, but specifically focus on how those identities are shaped through the online environment. Burke (2013) argues that while non-native speakers of a language may experience cultural and linguistic isolation and struggle to express their identities at school, many of these learners
develop online identities “using their literacy skills in a highly productive, engaged, and anonymous fashion” (p. 31). Furthermore, Burke (2013) notes that youth often participate in discourse communities built around online experiences and consequently develop virtual identities. De Costa and Norton (2016) agree that technological innovation influences learners, stating that learners are constantly navigating online and offline identities “in fluid and complex digital spaces” (p. 588). The online identities emphasised here should not be seen as a separate concept from online language identities. Darvin (2016, p. 523) argues that digital platforms transform language and, as a result, they also transform identity. It therefore seems appropriate to suggest that written laughter might form an important part of a learner’s online language identity.

1.2. Laughing online
Expressing laughter online is only one characteristic of cyber language. Based on previous research (Christopherson, 2013; Kadir et al., 2012; McKay, 2015), it appears that laughter can be expressed online through either the inclusion of initialisms (lol), onomatopoeic expressions (hahaha) or emojis (😂). For the present study, however, the focus is only on written laughter as onomatopoeic expressions, since these can be most easily linked to specific languages.

Osaka (1990, p. 25) explains that onomatopoeia indicates word formation based on the imitation of natural sound and notes that the interpretation of sound changes as language changes. This argument is supported by Nash (2001) who investigates how sound structure or word form imitates the sound of an animal or object. Nash (2001, p. 185) mentions that to an English speaker a dog’s bark is expressed as “woof-woof”, but to a Romanian, a dog says “ham-ham” and in Indonesia it is perceived as “gong-gong”. Through his field research, Nash (2001, p. 184) found that there seems to be a non-arbitrariness concerned with the sounds of some animals such as cats and cows since the sounds perceived in different languages are very similar.

Nash (2001, p. 185) argues that many onomatopoeic words found in different languages have evolved to their present form either recently or very rapidly and once they are part of a language’s lexical structure, they are subject to the same evolutionary processes that other words undergo.

The data and methods used in the present study are explained in the next section before a final discussion follows in section 3.

2. Methods
No materials or data were personally collected for the present study. Instead, various blogs and social media sites were visited to determine the types of written laughter that have been documented. Therefore, the study is based on empirical data (and observations).

2.1. The data
For the present study, the data taken from online blogs and other internet sites (Garber, 2012; Hadjin, 2017; Ho, 2018; Linguisticator, 2018; McCann & Brandom, 2012; McCulloch, 2015) is used to illustrate the argument that written laughter is language specific. The data used in the present study includes the following examples documented by bloggers:

(1) Hahaha (English)
(2) Jajajaja (Spanish)
(3) Kkkkkkk/ㅋㅋㅋㅋ (Korean)
(4) 哈哈哈哈哈 (Mandarin Chinese)
(5) Wwww (Japanese)
(6) Xaxaxaxa (Russian or Greek)
(7) 555555555(Thai)
(8) 😂 (Arabic)
The data includes only a few examples of written laughter that reflect a specific language; therefore, it is not an exhaustive list. However, since this study is exploratory the data included here is enough to support the arguments presented here. The eight examples included here are spelt differently but are all aimed at mimicking “laughing sounds”, except Japanese. This is discussed below.

Using “hahaha” is probably the most common way to laugh online. Ho (2018) estimates that around 312 million internet users in the USA used this onomatopoeic expression during 2018. Furthermore, an estimated 462 million internet users in India and 149 million internet users in Brazil also used this specific form of written laughter during that same period. According to Linguisticator (2018), English speakers use “hahaha” because it is how they onomatopoeically perceive laughing sounds in English. Interestingly, it appears that some other languages mimic the “English laughing sound” through the use of a language specific orthography for written laughter. For example, in Korean 헛��� is pronounced as repeated [h] sounds, causing it to be pronounced similar to the English perceived “hahaha” in written laughter. Since one does not write short vowels in Arabic, ﻋُﻮُﻦِ is also pronounced as repeated [h] sounds, mimicking the “hahaha” laughing sound. Thai seems to mimic the English laughing sound too, by repeating the number “5”, pronounced as [ha] (_defs). Therefore typing “5555” is equivalent to the English sound “hahaha” (Garber, 2012; Linguisticator, 2018). The same is true for Mandarin Chinese where 哈哈哈哈 is also pronounced as “hahaha”. In Spanish, written laughter is expressed as “jajaja” in which the “j” sound is pronounced similar to an aspirated [h] in English. Therefore, this form of written laughter is also considered a direct analogue of the English “hahaha” (Garber, 2012). In other examples of written laughter, the expressions do not necessarily correspond with the sound of laughter in English, but still express onomatopoeic sounds that one could associate with laughter. In both Greek and Russian, written laughter typed as “xaxaxa” is pronounced with a “ga” sound, the “g” being similar to the [x] sound in Afrikaans. In Korean, “kkkk” written laughter comes from the repeated consonant “k” (ㅋㅋㅋㅋ), which is pronounced “keu” [ku:] (Garber, 2012; McCulloch, 2015). Therefore, while in Greek and Russian as well as Thai, users may not be mimicking the “hahaha” sound of English laughter, these users are still mimicking laughter by repeating sounds that could be perceived as laughter.

Written laughter in Japanese is expressed as “wwwww”. This most likely originated from the Kanji character for “laugh”, which is pronounced as “warai” [wa’ra’i] in Japanese. This was then shortened to “wwwww” (Garber, 2012; Ho, 2018). Therefore, it seems the Japanese are not mimicking a laughing sound, but simply indicating that repeated laughter is taking place. Using Japanese written laughter online could nonetheless still be considered an indication of a person’s language identity since writing laughter as “wwww” can be linked to a Japanese language identity.

Thus, different languages have different forms of written laughter. This means that although some might assume that “hahaha” is a universal form of written laughter, laughter can be expressed onomatopoeically in different languages. Therefore, a language user needs to know specifically what written laughter means in order to use it correctly.

The discussion in section 3 considers how expressing written laughter online could be an indication of a user’s online language identity and explains the relevance of considering written laughter a part of language acquisition.

2.2. Methods

In the present study, the data is discussed based on observations and no physical analysis of the data (based on a particular method) is completed. The reason for this is that the aim is not to analyse the data in order to draw conclusions, but rather observe how the data is used in reality in order to support the arguments proposed earlier.
For the purposes of illustration, examples from Instagram are used to indicate how written laughter is used on a social media platform. Figure 1 includes some examples of how language-specific written laughter is used on Instagram. The examples indicate how users either choose to align themselves with the language identity of other users, or how they choose to use specific written laughter to indicate their individual language identity (distancing themselves from other language users).

In examples 1 and 2 (Figure 1), the users are “laughing” in Korean and Spanish, respectively, even though the other comments are in a different language. In examples 3 and 4, the users are “laughing” in the language used in the rest of the comment section, which are Greek and Thai, respectively. Thus, when the users choose to either use the written laughter of a language not...
being used in communication at that time, or choose to use the written laughter of the language used in the communication, they are expressing their language identities by either conforming to the language of others or distancing themselves from the language of others.

From the examples included here it therefore seems that users choose to express a particular language identity through written laughter.

3. Discussion: Laughing and language identity
From the discussions in sections 2 and 3, it seems that written laughter is an aspect of online communication that can assist language learners in communicating effectively in a virtual environment and contribute to establishing their online language identities.

O’Neil (2010, p. 120) mentions that just as facial expressions and laughter punctuate face-to-face, phone, and sign language conversations at sentence and phrase breaks, utterances such as “hahaha” form a similar sort of punctuation. Kurtz and Algoe (2015, pp. 573, 575) argue that laughter is instrumental in fostering personal relationships and that laughter can signal cooperative intent. Even though the aim of the present study is not to determine all the functions of laughter in the online environment, one could argue that the functions of written laughter might be the same as the functions identified by Kurtz and Algoe (2015). Thus, one could argue that when users are including written laughter, they are trying to foster a social relationship with other users.

However, using language-specific written laughter online is not necessarily something that all language users know how to do. In fact, learning how to laugh in a specific language could be equated to the process of acquiring language skills and knowledge through exposure to the culture of a (foreign) language. A term often discussed in foreign language acquisition that comes to mind is “Landeskunde”. According to Lysaght (1998), Landeskunde involves the teaching of culture, which is defined as “a set of rules, beliefs, traditions and customs which are commonly observed by a particular group of people in a particular society” (p. 3). Klippel (1990, p. 59) argues that a good way of acquiring interpretive competence (through Landeskunde) in a language is through encountering authentic communicative situations in either texts, films or in reality. The online environment can also count as an authentic communicative situation and, in such a case, a language user or language learner will acquire interpretive competence through exchanges with other users online.

At this point, it might not be clear how written laughter is relevant in terms of language acquisition. I argue that elements of cyber language (such as written laughter) could be incorporated in the same way that one would incorporate aspects such as slang into a language learning curriculum, since online slang is not only language specific but can be equated to the identity function of written laughter. Elsherif and Nuseir (2015, p. 6) specifically note how important slang is for language learners, mentioning that the use of slang helps them not only to gain social acceptance, but also to construct their identity. Bell and Bogan (2013, p. 18) also emphasise the importance of teaching slang to language learners, noting that learners must know how to use idioms and slang since these aspects of language learning can be very confusing and contribute to learners’ communicative competence barrier. Therefore, there seems to be a valid argument to not only consider the possibility that written laughter is used to express an online language identity, but also that this element of cyber language should be considered an important aspect of a language learner’s knowledge and must be communicated to them in order to prepare them for effective online communication.

4. Conclusion
This exploratory study investigated whether written laughter could be considered an expression of an individual’s language identity and why knowledge of written laughter might be a useful contribution to a learner’s language acquisition experience. The collected data suggests that written laughter may well play an important role in an online language identity. The fact that users are aware of the written laughter in a specific language and are using it online suggests that these users are making a conscious attempt to express their language even through the nonverbal...
elements of communication. This supports the argument that written laughter should be considered an important aspect of language acquisition. By doing so, the present study not only confirms that language and identity are inseparable, but also allows for new avenues in research concerning language and identity by considering these aspects in the online environment and by specifically considering written laughter as a way to express one’s language identity.

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