

A laughter is a laughter is a laughter? Long, but not short laughter bouts are noticed in conversation and related to conversational partners' moods.

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Abstract

Laughter is a common ingredient of everyday conversations and accompanies verbal exchanges at remarkably high rates. Anecdotal evidence suggested, however, that people engaged in a verbal interaction are often not aware of the accompanying laughter. This might be explained by differences in the acoustic quality of laughter. For example, conversational laughter bouts are considerably shorter and consist of fewer elements than those elicited in response to humorous material or tickling. In a playback study with recordings of dyadic conversations, we tested the perception and the evaluation of conversational laughter. We selected different conversation sections of three conversational dyads containing mainly short or long laughter bouts and systematically matched the number or the total duration of short and long laughter bouts in conversation sections of similar duration. Listeners (N = 72 undergraduate students, 36 women, 36 men) were asked to estimate the laughter frequencies in the conversation sections. In keeping with our assumption that short laughter bouts are not noticed as much as long ones, we expected ratings of laughter frequency to be lower in sections containing short laughter bouts than in sections with long laughter bouts. In addition, by inquiring into the perceived conversational partners' moods, we were able to relate this estimate to the occurrence of laughter. Also, we obtained several acoustic parameters for the laughter used in order to determine the features of a laughter sound that account mostly for the effects found. Listeners rated the frequency of laughter lower in conversations with shorter laughter bouts. Also, the conversations that contained only short laughs were rated lower in terms of the conversational partners' moods. Our results show that laughter is not necessarily related to humorous situations and mirth. In our view, laughter in conversation is a communicative signal rather than an expression of amusement that may be used in turn-taking and in evaluating or mitigating the meaning of preceding verbal utterances.