CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH HUMOROUS DIALOGUES[1]

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Abstract. In this article, I analyse laughter in everyday talk-in-interaction, both in professional and private contexts. The focus is on non-invited laughter units and on the relationship between laughter and identity construction. The main interest is to see if the speaker "announced" in any way that he/she expected a reaction (laughter included) from the audience. Thus, I suggest a distinction as far as laughable units are concerned in dialogue: overt marking (by means of within-speech laughter, independent laughter at the end of the utterance) – an invitation to laugh, and covert marking – although there is nothing in the actual words or wording that is laughable, the audience produces volunteered laughter.

Keywords: laughter, identity, talk-in-interaction, overt vs. covert marking.

1. INTRODUCTION

The academic interest for social relationships and the way individuals use language to construct an identity (or a set of identities) can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when Malinowski (1923) discussed the way humans construct, maintain and share "phatic communion". The basic idea is that humans do not live alone, but they are part of a larger community, and, within a community, language (in its broader meaning as "talk-in-interaction") is used as a means of identifying members and of establishing boundaries. Once an individual adheres to a group or a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998), he/she will adopt (and sometimes adapt to) the existing linguistic conventions of that group. In this paper, I put forward a discursive examination of joking and laughter in order to analyse the strategies used by participants to construct identity through humorous dialogue(s). In the analysis, I start from the premise that humans are dialogic beings – users and learners of language in various contexts. While acting and

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reacting in ever-changing environments (interpersonal or institutional), people try "to achieve more or less effectively certain purposes in dialogic interaction" (Weigand 2008: 3).

The data for this study are taken from naturally occurring face-to-face interactions and from phone calls, and they are instances of everyday and institutional interactions, which were recorded, transcribed and included in the volume *Interacțiunea verbală în limba română actuală. Corpus. Schiță de tipologie* (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2002).

After presenting some of the theories on laughter (Section 2), I will move on to analyse jokes which invite the audience to laugh (Section 3) and, in Section 4, I will discuss laughter as an invitation. Throughout the paper, laughter will be discussed as a means of constructing identity at the local level, while involved in a dialogue.

2. LAUGHTER – COMPONENT OF INTERACTION

At first, laughter has been considered a physiologic and psychological process that was triggered by social sources. In other words, laughter has been described as a complementary process that people experience in social encounters. In what follows, I will review a few theories on laughter. Thus, I will begin with Koestler's theory (1964), who considered that laughter was a primitive, involuntary and automatic response to external stimuli, and I will end with Jefferson's theory (1987), who proved that laughter was a controlled interactional mechanism.

2.1. Laughter – a psychological perspective

Koestler admitted that there was a paradox with laughter. On the one hand, laughter does not have any biological aim, in the sense that it does not have any significant contribution to the development of human species. On the other hand, laughter must have a well-defined role since it has been very well preserved during human evolution. In order to find an answer to this issue, Koestler considered that humour (stimulus of laughter) contained elements of aggression and hostility. On the physical and on the mental levels, these elements generate tensions which do not correspond anymore to the frame shift which characterizes humour, and they are released through face, voice and torso, and thus laughter is produced. Koestler considers that the main function of laughter is the release from tensions which have been gathered during a verbal encounter when a complex cultural stimulus was used. According to this theory, laughter is a reflex, a defence mechanism against aggression, and it does not take into account the diversity and the complexity of humour.

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Morreall (1983) suggests a psychological view on laughter, considering it a part of a living social process. His theory may be summarized as follows: laughter is associated with "a sudden and pleasant psychological shift" (1983: 39). Rephrasing it and introducing the stimulus (joke), the following reading of the theory is put forward: laughter appears when the discourse promotes a certain psychological state which is pleasantly interrupted by the evolution of the same discourse. In support of this theory, I will use the following extract (example 1), where Ana is the manager of a local newspaper, Cătă is a reporter whose article had not been published, and Robi is a co-worker of the two. Ana wants to offer moral support to Cătă by giving a personal story.

(1) 77 **Cătă**: şi au băgat chestia cu certificatele↓ cînd alea mai puteau să mai aştepte↓ deci important era materialu cu evaziunea fiscală nu cu certificatele de trezorerie.
78 **Ana**: sigur va intra mîine. pentru că aşa se întîmplă.
79 **Cătă**: da.
80 **Ana**: (xxx) am pierdut sîmbătă toată ziua↓ duminică am: stat de-am scris
81 ((***Robi rîde***))
82 + **Ana**: ***şi: mi-a intrat materialu azi. hai /şatap/***
83 **Robi**: ***hai să vă spun un banc cu pierdutu.*** într-o secție un polițai. se bagă trei într-o cameră↓ stinge căpitanu lumina↓ pac↓ trebuie să-mi spuneți unde s-a dus lumina. <$_{R}$ bă tu ştii? nu ştiu. tu ştii? nu ştiu. tu ştii? nu ştiu.> vă dau două săptămîni acasă↓ după două săptămîni veniți înapoi↓ dacă nu-mi spuneți unde: s-o dus lumina↓ vă dau afară. trec două săptămîni↓ vine primu. no↑ UNDE s-o dus lumina. nu ştiu. afară. al doilea. tu? UNDE s-o dus lumina. nu ştiu. afară. tu? <$_{IM, J}$ eu ştiu.> da↑ şi zi. CUM ai procedat. <$_{IM, R}$ m-am dus acasă↓ am bătut geamurile-n cuie↓ am bătut uşile-n cuie↓ am stins lumina şi-am început să caut.> şi-ai găsit-o? <$_{IM}$ am găsit-o↓ dom' căpitan.> UNDE. <$_{IM}$ în frigider.> ((rîs)) <$_{@}$ aşa şi tu. ai pierdut toată ziua de sîmbătă.> o mai găseşti? <$_{@}$ în frigider.>
84 **Ana**: e↑ nu↓ serios. am stat ca fraiera la conferința județeană a /pedesere/ului # de la: zece dimineața şi pînă la cinci.

(IVLRA 2002: 121-122)

77 **Cătă**: they introduced the article with those bonds↓ but these could have waited↓ so the article about tax evasion was important not the one with the bonds.
78 **Ana**: it will surely be introduced tomorrow because this is how they do it.
79 **Cătă**: right.

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80 **Ana**: (xxx) I lost all day Saturday↓ on Sunday I stayed and wrote it
81 ((***Robi laughs***))
82 + **Ana**: ***and: the article was introduced only today. come on shut up.***
83 **Robi**: ***let me tell you a joke about losing.*** […] In a police precinct. Three policemen get in a room, the captain turns off the light, click! "You must tell me where the light disappeared." "Hey, you, do you know?" "I don't know." "Do you know?" "I don't know." "You have two weeks to find out the answer. After two weeks you come back. If you don't tell me where the light disappeared, I'll fire you all!" Two weeks passed. The first man comes in. "Where did the light disappear?" "I don't know." "You're fired!" "Do you know?" "I don't know." "You're fired!" "Do you know?" "Yes, I do." "Well, tell me! How did you do it?" "I went home, I nailed the windows, I nailed the doors, I turned off the light and I started to look for the light." "And did you find it?" "I found it, captain!" "Where?" "In the fridge!" (laughter) <@ the same with you. You lost all day Saturday.> will you find it? <@ in the fridge.>
84 **Ana**: eh↑ no↓ seriously. I stayed like a fool at the press conference of the social-democratic party # from: ten in the morning until five.

I will first focus on line 81, where there appears a non-specific move since the presentation of a serious topic is followed by laughter. Robi does not wait for the manager to end her turn, but his involuntary laughter is overlapped with Ana's speech. Yet, there is nothing in the manager's turn that may have brought about laughter. In fact, what Robi does by the inserted laughter is take over the identity of a "joker" in order to show his opposition to the suggested topic and, at the same time, to indirectly imply that the dialogue should move away from the serious tone. Ana does not stop, but she continues with her speech, verbally opposing to Robi's indirect invitation to stop and listen to what he has to say (line 82 – *come on, shut up*). Although Robi adopted a private identity, which he wanted to present to the rest of the co-workers, the change of frame (from the "serious mode" to the "joking mode", see Mulkay 1988: 22-26) and identity was not helpful in trying to direct the dialogue towards a different topic.

Robi is not disarmed, but he takes advantage of the opportunity to take the floor and presents the reason of the interruption: *let me tell you a joke about losing*. By uttering these words, he requests to take the floor for a longer time in order to perform a joke. The use of such an utterance is strategic (Norrick 1993), functioning as a pre-request, since jokes are considered to be face threatening acts. The threat does not refer to the content of the joke, but to the fact that they interrupt the normal course of interaction and turn allocation rules are suspended for a

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period of time. Although Ana rejected at first Robi's indirect proposal to move away from the serious mode, she accepted the transitional phatic episode (Săftoiu 2012: 232) only after the speaker followed the pattern required by performing a joke.

I will now move to line 83, when Robi actually performs the joke. Initially, the joke promotes a certain psychological state in the form of a stereotype: policemen cannot face simple tests. Yet, the third respondent (a policeman as well) succeeds in offering an answer to the given problem (*I found it, captain!*), which leads to the unexpected discontinuity of the initial psychological state. Thus, one may think that not all policemen are incapable of solving simple problems. At the end of the joke, the initial story is re-analysed and laughter appears.

2.2. Laughter in interaction

In the theories presented above, laughter was mainly viewed from a psychological perspective. The next two theories focus on the social role of laughter and their results are based on recorded naturally occurring interactions.

Chapman (1976) starts from the assumption that laughter is primarily social. His study was based on a series of research activities whose main aim was to determine a relationship between the intensity of laughter and location/ participants. Thus, he concluded that children laughed more when they were accompanied by or in the presence of a colleague, while adults tended to control their reactions according to their partner's reactions: if their partner did not laugh when humorous material was shown to them, the amount of laughter was minimal, if, on the contrary, their partner laughed when humorous material was shown to them, laughter was shared and in a large amount. This study mainly suggests that people are more likely to laugh when other people around laugh. Chapman's study may also lead to the suggestion that, through laughter, people perform a certain type of social action, i.e. *disclosure*, and that participants in interaction use laughter in order to establish common ground.

Jefferson *et al*. (1987) put forward a theory of laughter from the point of view of conversation analysis. Until then, laughter was not transcribed, but only noted. Jefferson considers that laughter sounds should be included in speech when transcribing, not left aside. This manner of viewing laughter, as a component of interaction, together with the analyses that followed, allowed the author to conclude that laughter was a controlled interactional mechanism.

3. JOKES INVITING LAUGHTER

In this section, I start from Goffman's interaction ritual and his ideas on constructing meaning and analyse them in connection with joke telling, an activity whose purpose is, most often, to invite the audience to laugh. Goffman (1967)

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made it clear that interaction should not be viewed as a relationship between the individual and his/her psychology, but as a relationship that is established between co-present persons. Thus, Goffman envisaged the importance of co-presence in constructing meaning. This means that people interact to show their *face* and, at the same time, to preserve the face of other participants to interaction.

In the actual practice of joke telling, the joke (the discursive action) is accompanied by non-verbal (non-discursive) actions of the performer. These actions are used with a double purpose: the speaker presents him/herself and, at the same time, he/she gathers socially relevant data about their audience. The moment one of the participants begins to tell a joke, he/she takes advantage of a relevant moment to insert the humoristic discourse and, at the same time, he/she wants to prove his/her receptiveness or, on the contrary, his/her resistance to a certain issue before the joke was performed.

The following example is an excerpt from a conversation among first year female students who were having a casual conversation during a break between classes. In this particular fragment, they were talking about a movie that was to be shown at the university. Attention is drawn by the fact that Bea is the one initiating the topic of conversation and, at the same time, she moves away from the information she had given when another classmate expresses disagreement.

(2) 70 **Bea:** mie mi-a zis dana că nu se vede prea bine↓ pentru că [era:
71 **Alina:** [CINE ți-a zis.
72 **Bea:** dana.
73 **Alina:** CARE dana.
74 **Bea:** pîrvu.
75 **Alina:** e: nu se vede bine! c-am fost [eu
76 **Bea:** [n-a avut ochelarii la ea.
77 **Grup:** (râs)

(IVLRA 2002: 79)

70 **Bea:** Dana told me that one can't see very well because it [was
71 **Alina:** [who told you?
72 **Bea:** Dana.
73 **Alina:** Dana who?
74 **Bea:** Pîrvu.
75 **Alina:** eh, one can't see well! [I've been
76 **Bea:** [she wasn't wearing her glasses
77 **Group:** (laughter)

When it comes to talking about the movie, Bea's first action is to complain about the poor quality of the projection room (line 70 – *one can't see very well*). Yet, she does not take responsibility for her action, but uses the name of a

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classmate, Dana. Before rejecting Bea's complaint (line 75 – *eh, one can't see well! I've been*), Ali initiates a sequence of other-initiated repair made of questions and answers (lines 71-74) by means of which she wants to find out details about the person who provided the information about the room. Thus, Ali's action is meant to count as a pre-rejection of Bea's first statement.

Because she does not want to be held responsible for the misleading information, Bea comes up with an explanation: *she wasn't wearing her glasses*. In this utterance, she uses shared knowledge about the classmate: everybody present knows Dana is wearing glasses. Thus, Bea has overtly described and identified the main character of her discourse, i.e. Dana, based on the inference that a person wearing glasses has difficulty in seeing things clearly. In the next line, the group decodes laughability in Bea's utterance, laughter is initiated and Bea immediately joins.

Glenn (2003) distinguishes between two types of laughter: disaffiliative (*laughing at*) and appreciating (*laughing with*). The latter type is characteristic of joke telling, when participants are invited to laugh together with the performer of the joke. The former type appears when the performer fails to carry out his role or when hearers do not get the joke and do not offer the expected response, i.e. they do not laugh. In example (2), hearers initiated laughter, thus appreciating Bea's utterance and acknowledging it as laughable, and Bea joined them; thus, it was an instance of appreciating laughter.

Studies in conversation analysis have shown that participants share laughter. This sharing starts through an invitation – acceptance sequence and it is usually the speaker who invites his/her receiver(s) to laugh by either placing *within-speech laugh* or *independent laugh* (at the end of their turn) or even both. In other words, laughter tends to be replied with laughter.

If the receiver does not laugh, although he/she was invited, but wants to clarify, continue the previous topic or suggests another topic, we are dealing with a declination of the laugh invitation, showing the participant's unwillingness to laugh together with the other one(s). In studies on laughter as result of humorous discourse, the following interpretation appears: concomitantly with declination, the participant negatively evaluates either the joke – considering it inappropriate, or the performer of the joke – considering that his/her performance was not good.

Other studies suggested that the invitation – acceptance sequence was used when participants had previously negotiated and agreed upon their involvement in a *playframe* (Bateson 1953), which has certain roles associated to it. In the case of humorous discourse, the "play" refers to two messages which have to be understood and applied in conversation: on the one hand, there is a serious message which refers to the rules that must be observed, on the other – there is a metamessage, by means of which the speaker transmits that the intention of his/her piece of discourse is a humorous one. If these messages are decoded correctly, then there may appear relevant moments to perform a joke.

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Taking into account this theory, I may say that declination tends to appear in those situations in which participants have not negotiated nor did they agree upon a playframe. It may also happen that they have previously agreed upon such a playframe, but one of the participants does not want to take part anymore, but wants to withdraw from the interaction. This is the case of the utterance *Nu mă mai joc!* [I don't want to play anymore!] which mainly appears in children's interactions. When using this, the speaker announces the rest of the participants that he/she is not willing anymore to continue with the rules they had agreed upon. At the same time, when using this utterance, the speaker also expresses his/her desire to abandon the fun that the activity involved. At the same time, uttering *Nu mă mai joc!* [I don't want to play anymore!] may be viewed strategically, in the sense that the speaker expresses his/her desire to renegotiate the playframe and rest the identities each participant had so far.

4. LAUGHTER AS AN INVITATION

In this section, I will focus on *how* laughter appears without the speaker actually inviting laughter, i.e. speakers do not overtly include in their speech laughable units, nor are they initiators of laughter. When someone else other than the current speaker, who does not overtly mark his/her utterance as laughable, initiates a first occurrence of laughter, this is called *volunteered laughter* (Jefferson 1979). In other words, the current speaker does not directly invite laughter, but other participant initiates laughter.

4.1. Verbal devices

In what follows, I will perform a line by line analysis of utterances and the focus will be on whether the speaker, in his/her utterance, marked in any way that he/she expected a reaction (laughter included) from the audience. I will use the phrase *verbalized laughter trigger* to refer to such instances.

In example (3), Ioana is the house cleaner who, while doing her job, was asked by the owner of the house (Ana) about the trip she had made to her parents, in the southern part of the country, Bărăgan – where there are mainly large open fields and not wealthy people. In the excerpt below, the house cleaner is telling the lady owner about the difficulties her mother had to face on her way back to the village: Ioana's mother could not get in time to the railway station for a connection and had to spend all night in the middle of the field.

(3) 32 **Ana:** a:::↑că gara nu e chiar în sat↓
33 **Ioana:** no:: nu. şi-a dat seama că nu e nici o legătură. NU: circulă prin bărăganu ăla nenorocit↑ că atîta-l urăsc↑

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34 **Ana:** *hî hî hî*↓

(IVLRA 2002: 45)

32 **Ana:** a, the railway station is not in the village.
33 **Ioana:** well, no. she realized that she had no connection. nothing runs through that miserable Bărăgan, I hate it so much…
34 **Ana:** *ha ha ha*

By telling the story of the mother, a complete stranger to the lady owner, the house cleaner discloses a personal story and shifts reference to herself (line 33). The presentation of a personal problem raises the following issue: it may be followed by either receptiveness, or, on the contrary, resistance from the receiver. In line 33, there are at least two actions of the speaker: on the one hand, she acknowledges Ana's statement (*a, the railway station is not in the village*) that the train does not run through the village, and on the other – when shifting the perspective – she indirectly requests the lady owner to react (*nothing runs through that miserable Bărăgan, I hate it so much…*). This idea is supported by the rising intonation (transcribed as ↑) of Ioana's utterance, suggesting that she expected a reaction from Ana. On the lexical level, Ioana's request is prefaced by the expression of a deeply subjective point of view, dominated by words which show her total discomfort with the experience she has been telling: the adjective *miserable* and the verb *hate*.

The lady owner, out of several ways of compliance with a request, chose laughter. In this situation, Ana chose laughter to show Ioana that she was receptive to the problems she has just presented. Such a strategy displays "other-attentiveness" (Drew and Chilton 2000) and it may be associated with a phase of small talk, when people try to maintain a relationship.

I have previously analysed (Săftoiu, Popescu 2014, Săftoiu 2015) some excerpts from a joint session of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate on 19 April 2007, dedicated to debating the proposal to suspend from office the President of Romania at that time, Traian Băsescu (former member of the Democratic Party). In that particular session, some Members of the Parliament "sprayed" their speeches with humour, and their actions were supported by applause from various parliamentary groups, as well as laughter (recorded in the verbatim report). In what follows, I will dwell upon a common form of humour, i.e. the change of roles (*quid pro quo*): the speaker seems he has "just" made an action that is similar to that of the person being discussed. Unlike interactional humour that is built under the eyes of the participants, in this case the humorous mode is planned (i.e., *contrived humour*).

In example (4), Victor Ponta – member of the Chamber of Deputies representing the Social-Democratic Party – creates the impression of authenticity by presenting his speech in the form of a letter (a form of intertextuality, with

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reference to I. L. Caragiale's play "A lost letter"), a "note", a means of communication that was frequently used in 2007 between the two Palaces (Victoria – representing the Government, and Cotroceni – representing the Presidency).

(4) Ceva mai devreme am primit şi eu un bilețel şi un cadou, un obiect. În bilețel scrie aşa, sper să nu fac o indiscreție:
„Dragă Traiane,
Dacă azi pleci de la Cotroceni, te rugăm să nu uiți următoarele:
– să iei urnele cu voturile pe care le-a furat PSD-ul ca să ieşi tu preşedinte;
– să iei „țepele" care ți-au rămas la Cotroceni pentru că domnul Videanu a făcut parcări la Piața Victoriei;
– să nu uiți dosarele judecătorilor de la Curtea Constituțională;
– să nu uiți insigna pe care i-ai dat-o lui Emil Boc în fața camerelor de luat vederi şi i-ai luat-o imediat înapoi;
– să nu uiți bilețelele de la Călin sau de la Dinu sau de la altcineva;
– să nu uiți permisul de conducere care ți-a fost luat după vestita petrecere de la Golden Blitz;
– să nu uiți statuia de aluminiu primită de la domnul Stolojan;
– să nu uiți scrisorile de dragoste de la Emil Boc şi cartea cu Carol al II-lea pe care te-am tot rugat să o citeşti şi nu ai vrut să o citeşti;
– ai grijă unde te muți şi vezi cine-ți este vecin, că s-ar putea să-ți ia locul;
– să stingi lumina şi să sperăm că după tine va fi un alt fel de preşedinte, nu numai un alt preşedinte."
Este semnat.
Semnează: Mircea, Călin, Dan, Cornel, Marco, Vasile, Radu, Sorin şi mulți alții.
Am primit şi un cadou pentru domnul preşedinte. I-l las aici, că poate vine. Este o clepsidră cu nisip, exact pentru 5 minute. *(rumoare, discuții, râsete, aplauze)*
Sunt convins că după ce vom vota, se va găsi un prieten al preşedintelui – de la PLD sau de la PD – care o va întoarce şi, din acel moment, România poate va începe să trăiască un pic mai bine.
Să votați bine! *(discuții, aplauze, râsete)*

Earlier today I also received a note and a gift, an object. In the note, it is written as follows, I hope I am not making an indiscretion:
"Dear Traian,
If today you leave Cotroceni, please do not forget the following:
– to take the boxes with the votes SDP stole to make you a President;
– to take your „tricks" left at Cotroceni because Mr. Videanu made parking lots in Victoria Square;
– not to forget the cases of the judges from the Constitutional Court;

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– not to forget the badge you gave Emil Boc in front of cameras and you took it right back;
– not to forget the notes from Calin or Dinu or from another one;
– not to forget your driving license that was taken after the famous Golden Blitz party;
– not to forget the aluminium statue received from Mr. Stolojan;
– not to forget the love letters from Emil Boc and the book with Carol II that you've been asked to read, but you did not want to read;
– to watch your move and see who is your neighbour, because he could take your place;
– to turn off the light and hope that after you, there will be a different kind of president, not just another president."

It is signed.

Signed by: Mircea, Calin, Dan, Cornel, Marco, Vasile, Radu, Sorin and many others.

I received a gift for the President. I leave here, he may come. It is a sand hourglass, exactly for 5 minutes. *(Discussion, laughter, applause)*

I am convinced that when we vote, there will be a friend of the President – from LDP or DP – who will turn it and, from that moment, Romania can begin to live a little better.

Vote well! *(Discussions, applause, laughter)*

The narrative component prevails in this message which is made in the form of a list, referring to the various actions which have involved President Băsescu since his inauguration in December 2004, until the debate on the suspension from office (April 2007). The humorous mode (Mulkay 1988) was created from the beginning, with the announcement on the receipt of a note. The message is colloquial, that conflicts with the formal language usually used in front of cameras during interviews, but it fits very well with the default mode. The audience is taken into a humorous mode, in which every sentence has a double interpretation.

The gift announced by the speaker leads to disruption in the hall, but also laughter and applause. It is probably the most heterogeneous reaction encountered during these debates, as they were glossed in the transcripts. If laughter and applause are manifestations of association, rumour and (possibly conflicting) discussions are manifestations of dissociation.

The end of the speech delivered by Victor Ponta calls into question an element belonging to the "Băsescu brand" (Fairclough 2005, Ieţcu-Fairclough 2007, Săftoiu, Popescu 2012): the slogan used in the campaign of 2004. The slogan *Live well!* was so well retained by the collective mentality that has become a cliché, and any verb would appear in place of "live" turns the new sentence into a real brand and brings a smile. This means that the slogan itself developed humorous meanings and can be used to change the communicative frame.

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4.2. Non-verbal devices

In the following excerpt, taken from a TV morning show, there appear *non-verbalized laughter triggers*, i.e. physical actions. Horia, the male presenter of the show, suggested Sofia, a female viewer who was on the phone, to imagine that they could change roles.

(4) 13 **Horia:** UNDE-i televizoru↓ acolo↑ # sau acolo.
14 **Sofia:** ei nu. trebuie să stai invers.
15 **Horia:** cum?
16 **Sofia:** cu picioarele spre televizor
17 **Horia:** *ha ha ha* faci mişto de mine. deci↓ tu stai aşa↓ da↑ ((prezentatorul îşi schimbă poziția, îndreptându-şi picioarele spre camerele din studio pentru a sugera că se uită la televizor))
18 **Sofia:** *ha ha ha*
19 **Horia:** şi te uiți încolo↓ # da↑
20 **Sofia:** exact# [da da

(IVLRA 2002: 240)

13 **Horia:** where is the TV set? there or… there?
14 **Sofia:** well, no. you must turn around.
15 **Horia:** how?
16 **Sofia:** with your feet towards the TV set.
17 **Horia:** *ha ha ha* you're mocking me. so, you stay like this, right? ((the presenter changes his position, putting his feet towards the cameras in the studio, suggesting that he is watching TV))
18 **Sofia:** *ha ha ha*
19 **Horia:** and you look that way, right?
20 **Sofia:** exactly… yes, yes.

This is the actual conversation that was initiated over the phone to establish the playframe. Once the participants have agreed on the rules of the game, their conversation will continue within that frame. Since it was a phone call and the participants did not share the same visual context, they had to do a lot of conversational work in order to find out details about each other, especially about the viewer's context.

Because the presenter of the show needed to put himself into the viewer's shoes, he is the one who initiated the conversation, asking for clarification about the place of the TV set (line 13 – *where is the TV set? there or… there?*). The presenter sat on a couch, but the viewer is dissatisfied with that and asks him to turn around, but the presenter answers with laughter. He further makes a humorous remark (line 17 – *you're mocking me*), which is meant to confirm that they are sharing a playframe and that he will go along with that.

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The moment the place has been agreed upon, the presenter would like to check on it by asking yes/no questions. His first question (*so, you stay like this, right?*) is replied with laughter. It is not the actual wording of the question that is marked as laughable, but his physical actions when he asked it: he was sitting on a couch with his feet towards the cameras in the studio, thus suggesting he was watching TV. The viewer initiated volunteered laughter, but the presenter did not share. Instead, he went on asking the next question which got a verbalized answer (*exactly… yes, yes*).

In this example, non-verbalized laughter triggers (changing position with the feet towards the audience) were not very powerful, since the performer chose not to share laughter with his viewer. In other words, the viewer's volunteered laughter was declined.

4.3. Verbal and non-verbal devices

In the next excerpt, there appear both *verbalized* and *non-verbalized laughter triggers*. The extract is taken from a conversation between a girl (Diana) and her boyfriend (Tom) who share the day's happenings. Tom introduces a new male character in his story (line 124 – *there is one more*) and he offers a physical description.

(5) 124 **Tom:** deci dorin e oarecum personaju pozitiv. da' mai este unu↓ care <R ți-am spus că are <P fundu>> deci e: ((face un gest cu mîinile))
125 **Diana:** <@ *hai spune bîrfa*> mică↓ fundu mare↓
126 **Tom:** şi e c-o tipă
127 **Diana:** da↓ mare?
128 **Tom:** drăguță.
129 **Diana:** mare?
130 **Tom:** e: CA o bilă-aşa: ((repetă gestul))
131 **Diana:** *ha ha ha* aşa:

(IVLRA 2002: 64)

124 **Tom:** so Dorin is somewhat the positive character. but there is one more, whom I told you about that he's got <P a butt> so it's ((makes a gesture with his hands))
125 **Diana:** <@ *come on, say it*> little gossip, big butt
126 **Tom:** and he's with this girl
127 **Diana:** but a big one?
128 **Tom:** (who's) nice
129 **Diana:** big?
130 **Tom:** it's like a ball, like this ((he repeats the gesture))
131 **Diana:** *ha ha ha* like this

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The description is both verbalized and non-verbalized (*he's got <$_P$ a butt> so it's ((makes a gesture with his hands))*). In line 125, Diana's reaction is within-speech laughter, although her boyfriend had not marked verbally his utterance as laughable. On the contrary, Tom uttered the word "butt" in a quiet voice. It is his gesture that is identified as laughable and Jo continues by verbalizing their actions: they are gossiping and this is overtly marked as laughable. Diana's intention may have been to make Tom share laughter, but she gave up and did not overtly mark the second part of her utterance as laughable anymore. She used a play upon words, "*little* (gossip), *big* (butt)", which might have been decoded by Tom as a laughable unit.

In lines 126-129, each participant focuses on different conversational actions: Tom goes on telling about a "nice girl", while Diana pursuits the repetition of a laughable unit, indirectly requesting Tom to verbalize his action. In line 130, Tom complies with Diana's request (he eventually says that [the butt] *it's like a ball*) and repeats the non-verbalized laughable unit, i.e. the gesture. The combination of verbalized and non-verbalized laughter triggers leads to volunteered laughter (line 131).

In this section, I have identified two ways by means of which laughter may be invited: *verbalized laughter triggers*, i.e. when laughter is initiated as a result of a speaker's utterance, and *non-verbalized laughter triggers*, i.e. when laughter is initiated not as a result of the wording of the utterance, but as a result of the physical actions. Sometimes, these strategies were used in combination, as commented in the last example, in order to pursuit laughter and create a pleasant atmosphere.

By means of *verbalized laughter triggers* the speaker may covertly transmit his/her partner that he/she expects laughter. An overt expectation to laugh (i.e. direct invitation) would be when the speaker him/herself marks his utterance as laughable by within-speech laughter or independent laughter. I have also observed that *non-verbalized laughter triggers* did not lead to shared laughter, leaving it open the question whether speaker's physical actions may be considered laughable units or not.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I focused on *how* laughter appeared in everyday talk-in-interaction, both in professional and private contexts, without the speaker actually inviting laughter and on the relationship between laughter and identity construction. On the one hand, my interest was to see if the speaker "announced" in any way that he/she expected a reaction (laughter included) from the audience. Thus, I suggest a distinction as far as laughable units are concerned in a dialogue: *overt marking* (by means of within-speech laughter, independent laughter at the end of the utterance) – an invitation to laugh, and *covert marking* – although there is nothing in the actual words or wording that is laughable, the audience produces volunteered laughter.

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The covert marking seems to pose more problems than its overt counterpart, as it is highly dependent on laughter triggers: either *verbalized devices*, within the utterance (see Section 4.1.), or *non-verbalized devices*, within the physical gestures of the speaker (see Section 4.2.). When laughter was verbally triggered (i.e. recipients produced volunteered laughter), hearers showed appreciation of the speaker's utterance and acknowledged it as laughable. Thus, they joined in and shared laughter, presenting themselves as members of a community which promotes collegiality.

As far as political discourse is concerned, given the peculiarity of the analysed excerpt (debate on the proposal of suspension from office of the President of Romania), I consider humour allows "non-supporters" to challenge the "Băsescu brand", which created a powerful image in the minds of ordinary people. By adopting a humorous mode during their speeches, MPs test the behaviour of the audience and build on their identity. Yet, it is not a clear-cut identity, since it is somewhere between professional and personal identity: on the one hand, MPs use humour to come closer to the audience, they want to be likeable politicians, on the other, they use humour to carry a disguised attack on a political opponent.

In the examples analyzed for non-verbalized laughter triggers, the speakers (whose physical actions lead to laughter) did not respond positively, i.e. they did not share laughter, but continued their discourse. In other words, they declined receiver's invitation to laugh.

I have also identified both devices being used at the same time by the speaker. As there were two possibilities of replying to laughter (*laughing with* or *declination*), the stronger proved to be the latter.

Another issue of interest refers to situations when laughter was not replied positively. In one of the examples, laughter did not receive the expected reply (acceptance of invitation), because the participants had not previously agreed on the context. Once balance was established, i.e. the joke was performed in an agreed context, laughter appeared, but it was shortly ended. This may mean that in instances of "transitional" small talk, context needs to be renegotiated and participants have to establish a playframe in advance.

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