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Acquaintanceship, familiarity, and coordinated laughter in writing tutorials

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Abstract

This study compared the frequency, structure, and purposes of laughter in writing tutorials between 46 acquainted and unacquainted tutor–student pairs. Of particular interest were instances of shared, or coordinated laughter, which took the form of sequenced, simultaneous, and extended laughter. Familiarity, viewed as a continuum, was also investigated with reference to coordinated laughter. Results showed that coordinated laughter was indeed more frequent in acquainted-pair interactions, and in those interactions where both tutor and student moved beyond laughter as a way of mitigating face threat to a resource in developing familiarity. Implications are suggested for future research on acquaintanceship, familiarity, and laughter in educational settings.

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Keywords: Laughter; Acquaintanceship; Familiarity; Academic writing tutorials; Tutor–student interaction; English

Heard in a writing center:

- T: So um but “to meet,” I guess what's going on here is that “to meet another's acquaintance”
(.) um it's (4s) this verb I'm having trouble with. I mean, you “meet” someone, uh-huh
- S: but you don't “meet their acquaintance.”
- T: Right! O.K. **(((laugh)))** Well, that makes sense.
- S: o.k., [o.k.
- T: O.K. While you could meet their [acquaintance, you're my friend
- S: [Oh, right **(((laugh)))** but that's not the case here.
- T: Right.

(TM with NSF, Turns 18–19)

Over the past 30 years, writing centers have become a familiar element in the U.S. post-secondary environment. The mission of most echoes that of the one with which I am most familiar, from the Writing Center at the University of Kansas:

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We will help you understand and practice writing-to-learn for writing in all subjects now and for writing in the future. We will help you understand and practice many strategies effective writers use, from brainstorming to editing. We will support your growth as a writer and provide the expertise, the resources, and the space and time to work with you on your writing. . .

A good deal of writing center research has been conducted for strictly institutional purposes so that, for example, funding can be secured and tutors hired. What goes on *during* writing center tutorials (or consultations, as some prefer to term them) has only recently come under scrutiny. The goal of such work is to discover what linguistic and conversational features contribute to tutorial success, which some have described in terms of a successful interaction (e.g., Thonus, 2002) and others in terms of successful revisions of student work (e.g., Williams, 2006).

1. The social origins of laughter

This study is grounded in the assumption that the functions of laughter are primarily social, and that laughter, specifically jointly constituted laughter, indexes social relationship features, particularly acquaintanceship and degree of familiarity. Laughter “plays an essential role in building and expressing affiliation, alignment, identity, and relationships” (Partington, 2006, p. 229). Evidence supporting this thesis comes from fields as distinct as biology, linguistics, and the social sciences.

Neuroscientist Provine (2004) wrote that laughter most probably evolved from “the labor of physical play” stimulated by tickling, which highlights the distinction between self and other. As Provine noted, one cannot tickle oneself (p. 116). Chafe (2007) argued that “laughter combines pleasure with disablement” (i.e., normal breathing is disrupted, which violates the self-preservation instinct), and thus one would not choose to laugh in the presence of one’s enemies. Biologists Gervais and Wilson’s (2005) study of laughter labeled it the first “social vocalization,” 36 times more likely to occur in social than in individual contexts. *Duchenne* laughter (i.e., voiced, “smiley,” spontaneous) is essentially a “mirror system” of “cohesiveness and cooperation within goal-oriented groups” (p. 402) and a “social lubricant” that increases positive affect (p. 403). *Non-Duchenne* laughter plays more strategic roles: responding to awareness of stress, avoiding misunderstanding, facilitating friendliness, and metacommunicatively “punctuating” utterances.

Chafe (2007) explored the notion that nonseriousness is “triggered by events that violate expectations as a way of mitigating the threat posed by such violations” (p. 70). Chafe’s words recall the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and the idea that mitigation of threat through laughter may be more facilitative of polite communication among *unacquainted* persons. That is, laughter is social but may not always be either triggered by or trigger greater intimacy among interactants (Provine, 2000). This notion was explored further by Billig (2005), who focused attention on the “darker” function of laughter in punitive social control.

Humor often occasions laughter, but not all laughter is related to humor. Kluger (1994:16) wrote: “Most people think laughter is a response to something funny. . .but that turns out not to be [entirely] the case.” In a study of 1200 comments preceding laughter in 400 laughter episodes, Provine (1993) found that only 10–20% might be considered “humorous.” “Virtually any utterance or action can draw laughter,” wrote Glenn (2003), “under the right (or wrong) circumstances” (p. 49). He reported that the laughter–humor connection is so inconsistent (let alone unidirectional) that researchers “have abandoned using it as a reliable indicator that the subject perceives something as funny” (p. 24).

2. The structure of laughter

According to Devereux and Ginsburg (2001), more is known about the structure of bird songs than about the structure of human laughter. Some notable attempts, however, have been made to understand its systematic deployment in conversation, beginning with conversation analysts Jefferson (1979, 1984), Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1987), and Sacks (1992). First, laughter was distinguished from other nonlinguistic speech sounds (e.g., sighs, coughs, throat-clearings) as a conversational activity. Second, it fills turn slots, encodes speech acts, serves as backchannels, and responds to previous talk. Third, because conversation is *sequenced* oral interaction between/among two or more parties, laughter becomes the second move in an adjacency pair in which the first move is a humorous utterance, a *laughable*.

O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams (1983:176) summarized the options of the hearer (H) in responding to the speaker's (S) laughable:

S: laughable invites laughter \Rightarrow H accepts invitation to laugh \Rightarrow H laughs

\Rightarrow H declines invitation to laugh \Rightarrow H is silent

\Rightarrow H speaks

Glenn (1989) added to O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams' scheme by expanding the options of H's acceptance of the laughable. H's laughter may (a) extend the laughter; (b) draw attention back to the first laughable; or (c) create a new laughable. In this analysis, sequence was assumed to be obligatory: "Current speaker provides the first laugh." (p. 134). While this orthodoxy supported the premises of conversation analytic theory, it did not always mesh with the ever-growing body of data on conversational laughter. In his later work, Glenn (2003) took the focus off of laughables as a "causal stimulus" which, he argued, "recedes in favor of characterizing how its meaning gets constituted *jointly* by laughers and hearers" (p. 25, my emphasis). A growing number of researchers now agree that while the notion *laughable* is ingenious, it is neither consistently supplied by a single speaker nor responded to by a single hearer (see Jefferson et al., 1987, among others). That is, simultaneity as well as sequence, and the combination of the two, must be accounted for in the analysis of laughter.

In this study, I contextualize the analysis of laughter in academic writing tutorials that take place in university writing centers. I identify two major types of laughter, *single party* and *coordinated*. Coordinated laughter is further comprised of *sequenced*, *simultaneous* and *extended*. Each of these is explained and illustrated here with data from writing center tutorials. (See Section 7.3 below for information on transcription conventions.)

2.1. Single-party laughter

In most accounts, single-party laughter occurs because the hearer recognizes or accepts what the speaker identifies as a laughable. Rather than patterning as sequenced laughter declined, the issue of single-party laughter is much more complex. Excerpt (1) shows that single-party laughter may be embedded in one's own laughable (the tutor's laughable *death education* and the student's laughable *If you go to ERIC, there is hundreds of death education*), or be invitation for the laughter of the other (the tutor's laughable *That's really sick*):

- (1)
- S: And the argument about, and the argument about (4s) having like death education for children, you [know
- \Rightarrow T: **(((laugh)))** death education **(((laugh)))**
- S: [They, they call it death education!
- T: They call it death education?
- S: Yes, [yes.
- T: [Oh my God, that's terrible (.)
- S: They call it, there is a curriculum called death education.
- T: So it's a phrase that's used in psychological circles, [or something like that?
- S: yes [yes
- T: O.K. well that's great then. "The argument about" let's put it in quotations, "about death education."
- \Rightarrow S: **(((laugh)))** If you go to (.) ERIC, there is (.) hundreds of death education,
- T: ((cough)) you're kidding
- S: yes.
- T: ((whispers)) That's really sick.
- \Rightarrow S: **(((laugh)))**

(EB with NNSM, Turns 57-62)

2.2. Coordinated laughter

2.2.1. Sequenced laughter

In sequenced laughter, the speaker assesses the current utterance as laughable, and because he/she has the floor initiates laughter and then invites the hearer to participate. The hearer then accepts or declines the invitation to laugh

(Jefferson, 1979). In this excerpt, the student's laughable (*Basically, I'm not good at writing*) prompts first his own laughter and then the tutor's:

- (2)
- S: But problem is (.) um I'm not good at writing. I mean, it's not just because it's English writing. Basically I'm not good at writing, even if it was, you know, my native language. You know what I mean? (.)
- ⇒ T: [Yes.
- S: **(((laugh))**
- T: **((laugh))**

(AH with NNSM, Turns 7-8)

2.2.2. Simultaneous laughter

Simultaneous laughter is rarely treated as a distinct category in the literature. Neither Glenn (2003) nor O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams (1983) include it in the category "shared laughter." Previously Glenn (1989) had argued that mutual acceptance by a speaker and hearer that a topic is laughable (and thus created the *possibility* of simultaneous laughter) is a resource in affiliation. Jefferson et al. (1987) labeled simultaneous laughter in "expanded affiliative sequences" of extended talk as an "accessory" activity aimed at a specific outcome. Excerpt (3), in which laughter expresses the mutual relief of tutor and student (*You've got a thesis!*), exemplifies this:

- (3)
- S: This [is the thesis!
- T: [yeah You've got a thesis! ((tears sheet off))
- ⇒ S: Yeah. **(((laugh))**
- T: **(((laugh))** Good. And also in the meantime we've looked at a [lot of parts
- S: wow [yeah, like
- T: of the essay and understand that more.

(CL with NNSF, Turns 112-113)

The outcome, in this case, is a successful tutorial.

2.2.3. Extended laughter

Sequenced and simultaneous laughter sometimes develop into what Glenn (1989) termed "clusters" or extended laughter episodes. Houts-Smith (2007) labeled this "echoic laughter" in that conversational interlocutors are no longer responding to laughables but constructing laughter itself as a laughable. She found this type of laughter in fewer than 20 instances of laughter in a 570-laugh corpus (p. 51). As illustrated in (4), five separate laughables (four supplied by the tutor, one by the student) occur in an extended sequence, prompting both of them to laugh and culminating in a round of simultaneous laughter responding to the tutor's laughable *Interview, hell! Eat some stew!* The question becomes, at what point did the participants stop laughing at laughables and start laughing at laughter itself?

- (4)
- T: Yeah, have you ever had the Irish stew at The Irish Lion? (.)
- S: Have I ever had the, no. Is it good?
- T: oh!
- ⇒ S: Oh! It's so good! **(((laugh))** I'm hungry. It's close to [dinner. Excuse me. **(((laugh))**
- T: **(((laugh))** Oh, I don't mind. (4s) I have to admit I've never had Irish stew.
- ⇒ T: **(((laugh))** **(((laugh))** Oh! [You need a research field trip for this paper. (4s)
- S: [I, I know! **(((laugh))**
- ⇒ T: Interview a good chef.
- ⇒ T: **(((laugh))** [Interview, hell! Eat some stew! **(((laugh))**
- S: **(((laugh))** **(((laugh))**

(KZ with NSF, Turns 40-44)

One of the characteristics of both simultaneous and extended laughter is their appearance on a *collaborative floor* (Edelsky, 1993). That is, the “turn” is jointly constructed on shared knowledge and growing familiarity. Sequence becomes irrelevant because the identification of laughable(s) grows more difficult and even impossible. Coates (2007) argued that such “laughter in a play frame” is coordinated precisely because the rules of sequence no longer apply.

3. Incongruity theory

If laughables are not always the stimulus for laughter, what is? Glenn (2003) summarized three major theories of laughter, each of which results from a “pleasant psychological shift.” Of the three (superiority/hostility theory, relief theory, incongruity theory), he concluded that only the last permits a direct connection between laughter and positive affect and thus affiliation.

Houts-Smith (2007) quotes Morreall's (1987) definition of incongruity: “A relation of conflict between something we perceive, remember, or imagine, on the one hand, and our conceptual patterns with their attendant expectations, on the other” (p. 189). Incongruity generated by perception conflicting with expectation, she argued, can explain why in the same context one person may laugh but another may not (p. 162). Nevertheless, expectation violations occasioning laughter can have positive consequences for affiliation. The purpose of laughter, then, is to “create the shortest distance between two people”:

Laughter centers on incongruities, and incongruities abound in social situations because there is incongruity inherent in the self-other distinction. Since every individual has a unique set of experiences and perceptions of that experience, there is a gap between any two individuals. . . In the awareness of a gap and in the awareness of a bridge over the gap, the gap is perceived and the one perceiving will laugh. Laughter has great sociality because sociality has real incongruity; what is real to one is unreal to another. As we strive to create a social reality by sharing our own experiences and perceptions of experiences with another, we perceive the gap between more readily, and we laugh more readily (2007, pp. 168–169).

Houts-Smith concluded that laughter may, finally, react to points of *similarity* as well as difference between participants: “If the gap is bridged, the two interactants will affiliate and become closer to each other by creating a social reality wherein perceptions are held in common” (p. 173).

4. Laughter and affiliation

Crucial to the investigation of conversational laughter is the question of who has the prerogative and/or obligation to initiate it or to respond to it, that is, the effect of status differential. Summarizing research on laughter in status-differentiated pairs, Cole (1996) reported that the superordinate member of the dyad usually provides the stimulus to which the subordinate member responds with laughter. Chew (1997:209) found that in unequal-status encounters the lower-status interactant was more likely to engage in joking and laughter in “attempting to make a good impression on the other.” Specific social variables implicated in status difference – including gender, language, and expertise – have also been linked to laughter type and frequency. Davies (2003) observed how English learners deployed humor and laughter in interactions with native speakers. For their part, Adelswärd and Öbert (1998:425) showed how language proficiency (native vs. nonnative-speaker status) was implicated in the distinction between laughter types. They found that “disadvantaged” nonnative speakers were more likely to engage in “unilateral [single-party] laughter.”

Adelswärd (1989) noted that to the extent that women tend to take on greater responsibility for relationship maintenance, it is expected (and documented) that they laugh more often than males. Kluger (1994) reported that in male–female conversations, females are likely to laugh when males have the floor, but males are not as likely to laugh when females have the floor. In their analysis of humor and laughter in task discussions in the workplace, Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) linked status and gender, noting that cohesion-building humor, particularly self-deprecating humor, was initiated by lower-status members (most often women), while differentiating humor (one-upmanship) was more often initiated by higher-status members (most often males). But they also found that as a group “developed,” differentiating humor was less often heard (123).

More complex is female–female troubles-talk (Jefferson, 1984), fueled by apparent but deceptively impersonal self-mockery accompanied by laughter at self (Kotthoff, 2000). Hearer laughter in this case may mark resistance to the

speaker's trouble or complaint. That is, *not* responding to laughter may be more affiliative than responding, showing that the hearer takes the speaker's troubles seriously.

Coordinated laughter, then, is a resource in affiliation. That coordinated, not just single-party, laughter should be the focus of research efforts is intuitively satisfying: why laugh alone? As Sacks (1992:571) explained, "The thing about laughing is that to do laughing right, it should be done together." Coordinated laughter displays like-mindedness, alignment, and affiliation in dyadic and multi-party conversations: "Laughing together is a valued occurrence which can be the product of methodic, coordinated activities" (Jefferson, 1984:348). The status differential has lost its power.

5. Laughter in academic writing tutorials

To my knowledge, Zdrojkowski (2007) is the first to have focused an entire research study on writing center laughter: *Laughter in interaction: The discourse function of laughter in writing tutorials*. She situated her research within the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), which seeks to explain how conversational participants balance their desire for autonomy (negative face) with their desire for approval from others (positive face). This "facework" is carried out through selection of politeness formulas enabling interlocutors to align themselves in various ways. Zdrojkowski examined how laughter in these writing center tutorials was deployed "to show affiliation, to mitigate a comment. . . or to show disaffiliation" (abstract).

Not surprisingly, Zdrojkowski found that most laughter in the 36 tutorials she transcribed lacked the obvious "humorous stimulus" (ix) or "laughable." She used the labels "shared" vs. "unilateral" laughter (2007:32); in her study, "shared laughter" is closest to the "sequenced laughter" label that I introduced in Section 2 (above). According to Zdrojkowski, sequenced laughter "smooths over difficulties" and marks transitions from a serious to a play frame. Tutors and students used laughter for different purposes depending on institutional status: Tutors laughed to support students' attempts at humor or to express empathy or understanding, and students laughed "to show *support* for something the tutor has said" (2007:171). Another of Zdrojkowski's findings linked laughter initiation and gender. When compared to male tutors and students, female tutors and students were almost twice as likely to initiate laughter. She also found that affiliative laughter was more likely to occur in female/female dyads (tutor and student) than in male–male or male–female dyads.

At most large colleges and universities, issues of acquaintanceship and familiarity are fairly straightforward. Students are unlikely to be paired with a tutor whom they will encounter in any other setting besides the writing center, and it is likely that prior acquaintanceship is inversely proportional to institutional size. In general, then, tutors either have met their tutees through previous interaction in the writing center or have not met or will not meet them in any other setting. None of Zdrojkowski's research participants were previously acquainted. Consequently, she admitted to the impossibility of drawing conclusions about laughter with regard to acquaintanceship. Regarding laughter and degree of familiarity, however, Zdrojkowski concluded, "The occurrence of even higher rates of laughter in tutorials with participants who are [more] familiar with each other suggests. . . that the dichotomous nature of tutor/authority-student/subordinate may lessen somewhat *over time*" (2007:226, *my emphasis*).

6. Acquaintanceship, familiarity, and laughter

It is difficult to find a consistent definition of either *acquaintanceship* or of *familiarity* in cross-disciplinary research literature. Starzyk et al. (2006), for example, distinguished between the *quantity* of acquaintanceship, deriving from duration and frequency of contact, and its *quality*, based on self-disclosure by social penetration via verbal, physical, and environmental means, creating a sense of in-group membership. In this paper, I will label Starzyk et al.'s "quantity" of acquaintanceship simply as "acquaintanceship." I will label their "quality" of acquaintanceship as "familiarity." *Acquaintanceship*, then, is an absolute category, the polarity *acquainted* vs. *unacquainted*, and *familiarity* is a scalar category, a continuum of "getting to know you" beyond initial acquaintanceship.

The metapragmatic display of laughter plays a role in moving new relationships along the familiarity–intimacy continuum. A number of studies have linked greater familiarity with more laughter, period. For instance, participants in Kotthoff's (2003) investigation of 30 h of dinner-table conversations were members of an acquainted, "tight" group, in which laughter served as a response to irony and as repartee to ironic utterances by other interlocutors. Through laughter, "the speakers communicate[d] extensive knowledge of one another and teasingly confirm[ed] themselves as in-group members" (Kotthoff, 2003:1396). Planalp and Benson (1992:494) found that "friends [those further along

the familiarity continuum] laugh more than acquaintances [during initial meeting] do; acquaintances' laughter is nervous."

Interestingly, coordinated laughter was first linked to *lack* of personal familiarity. O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams (1983), for instance, reported a high incidence of this type of laughter in initial interactions between *unacquainted* persons. This finding, however, is not consistent with later studies. Glenn (2003) found that the achievement of coordinated laughter was facilitated by familiarity (which, I would argue, implies prior acquaintanceship) among conversational interlocutors.

Analysts of oral discourse tend to fall into two groups depending on their treatment of contextual variables as factors influencing particular conversational features. In the conversation-analytic literature, the work of Chew (1997) and of Norrick (1994), for example, construct "familiarity," "alignment," and "involvement" during, not before, interaction. On the other hand, it is typical for researchers in the disciplines of sociolinguistics, psychology, and speech communication to view conversational features as influenced by pre-existing contextual variables such as status and gender (see above). These variables carry predictive weight in the formation of hypotheses about laughter (Adelswärd & Öbert, 1998; Glenn, 1989; O'Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983). Both of these analytical approaches are relevant to the study of acquaintanceship, familiarity, and laughter in academic writing tutorials. As will become evident in the data analysis below, single-party laughter seems most likely involved in facework and conditioned by contextual variables (such as acquaintanceship) while coordinated laughter, analyzed as "coherent, monitorable units" (Jefferson et al., 1987) seems to build affiliation sequence by sequence as familiarity develops.

7. Method

7.1. Research questions

These research questions guided the inquiry: Do tutorials in which tutor and student are *acquainted* differ in frequency and types of laughter than those in which they are *unacquainted*? More specifically, how does acquaintanceship affect the incidence of coordinated laughter in writing tutorials? How does growing familiarity between tutor and tutee affect the frequency and types of laughter in these interactions?

7.2. Setting and participants

Data for this study were collected from tutorials held at the writing center of a large state university in the U.S. The writing center had originally been conceived as a support service for students in English composition classes, but more recently its audience broadened to include graduate and undergraduate students, both native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English, across the full range of academic disciplines. Tutors were graduate students in a broad range of disciplines, though at the time these data were collected, most of the tutors employed by the writing center were graduate students in literature or composition in the Department of English. Table 1 presents information on the 20 tutors and 46 tutees who participated in the study. Sixteen of the 46 tutorials represented interactions between acquainted persons. Eighteen of the tutorials were held with students who were NNSs of English. Thirteen of the tutorials were F–F dyads (i.e. female tutor–female student); 5 were M–M; 13 were F–M; and another 13 were M–F.

Based on cumulative census data, the "prototypical" writing center tutee is a NS female undergraduate seeking discipline-specific tutoring only once per semester, most likely with the prototypical writing center tutor, a female English literature graduate student. Although limiting tutors and tutees to these characterizations presents a caricature of the study participants and of the writing center, it must be noted that repeat tutorials were not the norm. Recall that none of Zdrojkowski's tutor–student pairs were previously acquainted, so she could draw no conclusions about laughter with regard to acquaintanceship. In contrast, this is possible in the present study because (a) a larger number of tutorials were examined and (b) tutorials with both acquainted and unacquainted pairs were recorded. Nonetheless, the majority of tutorials held at this writing center were between unacquainted persons and led by female tutors, as reflected in the sample.

These 46 interactions between tutors and students were analyzed for acquaintanceship, frequency of laughter, and laughter types. In addition to the tutorials, some participant interpretations were gathered in interviews with some of the tutors and students (cf. Thonus, 1998, 1999, 2002). These were helpful in understanding the meaning of laughter

Table 1
Tutor and student information

Tutor	Gender	Tutor area of expertise	Student Lang. Prof. and Gender	Student paper area	Acquainted?
AH	F	Comparative literature	NNSM	English (composition)	Yes
BU	F	English	NNSF	English (literature)	Yes
CD	M	English	NSF	English (composition)	Yes
CD			NSM	Business	Yes
CD			NNSF ^a	Journalism	Yes
CD			NNSF	English (composition)	No
CD			NNSM	Business	No
CL	F	English	NNSF	English (composition)	Yes
CP	F	History	NSF	Political science	Yes
CP			NSM	Anthropology	Yes
CP			NNSF	Sociology	No
CP			NNSM	History	No
CR	F	English	NSF	English (composition)	Yes
DP	M	English	NSF	English (literature)	No
DP			NSM	Speech	No
DP			NSF	Political science	Yes
EB	F	English	NSF	Anthropology	No
EB			NSM	Biology	No
EB			NSM	Mathematics	Yes
EB			NNSM	English (composition)	No
GT	M	Philosophy	NSF	Sociology	Yes
JD	F	Sociology	NNSF	Religious studies	Yes
KE	F	English	NNSF	English (composition)	No
KZ	F	English	NSF	Folklore	No
MN	M	English	NSF	Biology	No
MN			NSM	English (composition)	No
MN			NNSF ^a	Japanese literature	No
MN			NNSM	English (composition)	Yes
MR	F	History	NSF	Telecommunications	No
MR			NSM	History	No
MR			NNSM ^a	Education	No
MW	M	English	NSF	Business	No
MW			NSM	Business	No
MW			NNSF	Music	No
SF	F	Education	NSF	English (composition)	Yes
TM	M	History/Phil. of Science	NSF	Sociology	No
TM			NSM	English (composition)	No
TT	F	Linguistics	NSF	English (composition)	No
TT			NSM	English (composition)	No
TT			NNSM ^a	Education	Yes
WC	M	English	NSF	Biology	No
WC			NNSF	English (professional writing)	No
YW	F	English	NSF	Comparative literature	No
YW			NSM	English (composition)	No
YW			NNSF ^a	Education	No
YW			NNSM ^a	Library science	No

^a Graduate students.

to the participants and the effects of laughter on their perceptions of one another and on the development of familiarity in their interaction.

7.3. Transcription

Transcription conventions adopted here, based on Edwards (1993) and refined by Gilewicz and Thonus (2003) consist of a vertical, running arrangement of text in which utterance and nonutterance materials are incorporated in

Table 2
Laughter in tutorials between acquainted pairs ($n = 16$)

Tutor	Gender	Tutor major area	Student Lang. Prof. and Gender	Student paper content area	Laughter rate	Coordinated laughter
AH	F	Comparative literature	NNSM	English (composition)	.35	3
BU	F	English	NNSF	English (literature)	.49	4
CD	M	English	NSF	English (composition)	.13	4
CD			NSM	Business	.05	0
CD			NNSF ^a	Journalism	.21	1
CL	F	English	NNSF	English (composition)	.24	1
CP	F	History	NSF	Political science	.53	13
CP			NSM	Anthropology	.36	4
CR	F	English	NSF	English (composition)	.60	7
DP	M	English	NSF	Political science	.33	7
EB	F	English	NSM	Mathematics	.35	0
GT	M	Philosophy	NSF	Sociology	.24	1
JD	F	Sociology	NNSF	Religious studies	.06	0
MN	M	English	NNSM	English (composition)	.04	0
SF	F	Education	NSF	English (composition)	.60	7
TT	F	Linguistics	NNSM ^a	Education	.16	5
Mean					.30	3.6

^a Graduate students.

an approximation of real-time interaction (see [Appendix A](#) for details). In these transcripts laughter is represented as ((**laugh**)), not as laughter pulses (*heheheh*) as is common in conversation-analytic transcription (e.g., [Jefferson, 1979, 1984](#)). There are two reasons for this: First, “real time” as a mismatch between physical measurement and perceptual report has been identified by critics of conversation analysis ([O’Connell & Kowal, 1990](#)), an argument I find convincing. Second, given the analytical requirements of this research project, the information “who started first” was the only necessary criterion in laughter transcription. Thus, noting the number and alignment of laughter pulses seemed unnecessary given the aims of the study.

8. Results and discussion

Results are divided into three sections: first, a account of the frequency and type of laughter (single party, sequenced, simultaneous, and extended) occurring in the tutorials; second, a report of aggregate rates of laughter and of coordinated laughter. Finally, summaries with examples of two tutorials in which tutor and student were not previously acquainted are examined for laughter as a resource in developing familiarity.

8.1. Laughter frequency

Of the top 10 laughter rates, which ranged from 1.06 to 0.30 per turn, 6 were in tutorials between acquainted pairs (see [Table 2](#)). On average, acquainted pairs ($n = 16$) laughed at an average rate of 0.30 per turn and evidenced 3.6 tokens of coordinated laughter per tutorial. Unacquainted pairs ($n = 30$) laughed at an average rate of 0.20 per turn and 2.1 tokens of coordinated laughter (see [Table 3](#)). However, in terms of number of instances of coordinated laughter, the most (24) occurred in a tutorial between an unacquainted pair (KZ with NSF). The next most numerous (13, 7, and 7) occurred in tutorials between acquainted pairs (CP with NSF; DP with NSF; and SG with NSF). For coordinated laughter, as for overall laughter rates, acquaintanceship was predictive.

Although overall more laughter and coordinated laughter occurred in tutorials between acquainted pairs, comparisons of tutorials between acquainted/unacquainted match-ups *with the same tutor* were inconclusive. That is, tutor behavior varied depending on the student he/she was working with; however, this variation was unsystematic with regard to social variables such as gender, language proficiency, and subject-area expertise. This finding suggests that both tutor and student cooperate in the purposeful development of familiarity, and that the willingness to do this trumps contextual predictions.

Table 3

Laughter in tutorials between unacquainted pairs ($n = 30$)

Tutor	Gender	Tutor major area	Student Lang. Prof. and Gender	Student paper content area	Laughter rate	Coordinated laughter
CD	M	English	NNSF	English (composition)	.12	0
CD			NNSM	Business	.08	0
CP	F	Sociology	NNSF	Sociology	.13	1
CP			NNSM	History	.09	4
DP	M	English	NSF	English (literature)	.35	2
DP			NSF	Speech	.02	0
EB	F	English	NSF	Anthropology	.46	2
EB			NSM	Biology	.29	2
EB			NNSM	English (composition)	.33	5
KE	F	English	NNSF	English (composition)	.14	1
KZ	F	English	NSF	Folklore	.62	24
MN			NSM	English (composition)	.08	1
MN	M	English	NSF	Biology	.14	0
MN			NNSF ^a	Japanese literature	.04	2
MR	F	History	NSF	Telecommunications	1.06	5
MR			NSM	History	.14	0
MR			NNSM ^a	Education	.10	1
MW	M	English	NSF	Business	.14	0
MW			NSM	Business	.05	0
MW			NNSF	Music	.07	2
TM	M	History/Phil. of Science	NSF	Sociology	.19	3
TM			NSM	English (composition)	.13	1
TT	F	Linguistics	NSF	English (composition)	.13	1
TT			NSM	English (composition)	.19	1
WC	M	English	NSF	Biology	.06	0
WC			NNSF	English (professional writing)	0	0
YW	F	English	NSF	Comparative literature	.15	1
YW			NSM	English (composition)	.11	2
YW			NNSF ^a	Education	.03	0
YW			NNSM ^a	Library science	.19	2
Mean					.19	2.1

^a Graduate students.

8.2. Laughter types

8.2.1. Single-party laughter

Of the 988 instances of laughter in the 46 transcripts, 833, or 84%, classified as single-party laughter. Of these instances, 526 (63%) were student laughter, while only 307 (37%) were tutor laughter. In tutorials featuring very little laughter, the only laughter was single-party (e.g., WC with NSF, 11 tokens, 10 of them single-party student laughter). Even in tutorials such as KZ with NSF (which featured the most coordinated laughter of any tutorial), 80 of 106 laughter tokens were either single-party tutor or student laughter. Typically, tutors engaged in single-party laughter to assert authority or to underline a critique or directive. They also used laughter to mitigate directives, as DP does with the oblique request *What's the second point that you're making?* in (5):

- (5)
- T: So there's kind of two different things going on there. The, the more pragmatic thing is that um we can't all have a big town meeting, right you know, two hundred fifty or two hundred million or
- S: right
- T: whatever, and the second thing I hear you saying is that (.) um (2s) we, well, what, what, what's the second ((laugh)) point that you're making? I'm trying to, trying to paraphrase you (.)

(DP with NSF, Turn 11)

Students, on the other hand, usually engaged in single-party laughter to display nervousness or to acknowledge error, as in (6), or to mark resistance, as in (7):

- (6)
 T: Don't change things that aren't already right.
 S: ((laugh)) all right

(BU with NSF, Turn 73)

- (7)
 T: What's convincing me here is not the quote. What's convincing me here is (.) Diana.
 S: Right. (.) But couldn't I just leave it in there anyway? ((laugh)) I don't know. I'm attached to my quotes.
 ((laugh)) (.)
 T: Well (.) it's your paper.
 S: All right. Put a question mark by it. I'll think about it ((laugh)). (7s)

(CR with NSF, Turns 81–82)

8.2.2. Coordinated laughter

In these data, T → S laughter sequencing was more frequent. Due to the difference in status, students were more likely to accept tutors' invitations to laugh, as in (8). The tutor identifies instructor comments on the student's written draft as laughable, inviting her to laugh along. Note that the sequenced laughter becomes simultaneous in the next turn:

- (8)
 ⇒ T: ((reading instructor comment)) ((laugh)) That's [good! I like that!
 S: [((laugh))
 Someone else was here, I know who was it, or give me some hint or of like, "Do I need to go
 ⇒ on, or what?" She said, "Well answer these two questions: 'Why? So what?'"
 T: [((laugh))
 S: [((laugh))
 T: So what? Who [cares? Why am I here?
 S: [cares

(DP with NSF, Turns 59–60)

Not all sequenced laughter, however, was initiated by tutors. In (9), for example, the student's self-suggestion (*In conclusion?*) is deemed laughable first by the student and then by the tutor:

- (9)
 T: Um O.K. Now, your conclusion, you need a little bit of a transition. Because I, it
 S: o.k.
 T: wasn't clear to me that you stopped talking about the Egyptians. So you need to sort of
 S: o.k.
 T: signal to your reader something like um (.) if you want to
 ⇒ S: In conclusion? ((laugh))
 T: No ((laugh)) Argh!

(EB with NSM, Turns 115–116)

From their vantage point as higher-status interlocutors, tutors were not obligated to accept student invitations to laugh, though this tutor did.

There were 76 instances of simultaneous laughter in the 46 tutorials, 24 of them in one tutorial alone (KZ with NSF, unacquainted). As illustrated in (8) above, simultaneous laughter often develops out of single-party or sequenced laughter. However, in these data it sometimes occurred spontaneously, as in the tutor's and student's responses to the dictionary definition as irrelevant laughable *or against the rainy day* in (10):

- (10)
 ⇒ T: So oftentimes you have to use a dictionary, then, to make sure it's the right definition. (13s) O.K.
 Here's "provide." Now they give you three options: "furnish, prepare, or against the rainy day." (.)
 [((laugh)) I think that we can cut out the last one, [don't you? Which is most similar to what you want?
 S: [((laugh)) [((laugh))

(CR with NSF, Turn 116)

In interviews, tutors and students identified simultaneous laughter as laughing *with* (cf. Glenn, 1989), a movement towards solidarity, in contrast to the laughing *at* of single-party responses to laughables. These terms were voiced by

a tutee (in GT with NSF), who said of her tutor, “He’s trying to make me more comfortable. . . I’ll laugh *with* you, not *at* you” (Thonus, 1998:403). Simultaneous laughter was cited by participants as contributing to or indicative of a “successful” tutorial (cf. Thonus, 2002).

It is important to note that overall laughter rate and incidence of coordinated laughter did not always correspond. For example, CP’s tutorial with NNSM evidenced a low laughter rate (0.09 per turn) but four instances of coordinated laughter. The tutorial with the highest overall laughter rate (MR with NSF, 1.06 per turn) evidenced only five instances of coordinated laughter, while the tutorial with the most coordinated laughter (KZ with NSF, 24) had a laughter rate of only 0.62 per turn. These results indicate that coordinated laughter (i.e., simultaneous or sequenced) is not necessarily related to single-party laughter or even to overall frequency of laughter in a tutorial.

Episodes of extended laughter were quite rare in these data, just as they were in Houts-Smith’s (2007). Given the plethora of coordinated laughter in the tutorial between KZ and NSF, it is not surprising that four extended laughter episodes appeared in the transcript. Other tutorials featuring extended laughter were DP with NSF and SG with NSF. Although the three students in these cases were NSFs, the tutors were both male (DP) and female (KZ and SG). This finding suggests that *tutor* gender is not a salient determinant of laughter in these data, although *student* gender may be (cf. Thonus, 1999).

In interviews, these tutors and students explained how extended laughter signified status leveling for them as well as a welcome break from the institutional context. This excerpt from DP’s tutorial with NSF contains an episode of extended laughter around the student’s laughable *What’s my point?* and tutor’s laughable *We should trade places. You can tutor me!* This is the most explicit example in the data of the connection between status leveling and extended laughter. Note, however, that the student interrupts the tutor’s last laugh, pulling the conversation back to the topic at hand:

- (11)
- ⇒ T: Um (5s) and I’m wondering, let’s see (5s) what’s, what’s um ((laugh)) [I’m trying
 ⇒ S: [What’s my point?
 ⇒ T: Yeah, that’s re-, that’s really good. You should (((laugh))), we should, we should trade places.
 S: (((laugh)))
 T: You can tutor me! ((laugh)) Yeah, what’s y- (((laugh)))
 S: [I guess what I’m, what I was trying to say is...

(DP with NSF, Turns 56–57)

8.3. *Laughter as a resource in developing familiarity*

8.3.1. *KZ with NSF*

In terms of acquaintanceship and laughter, the tutorial between KZ and NSF seems anomalous, as this tutorial between an *unacquainted* pair contained nearly three times more coordinated laughter than any other. The circumstances of the tutorial may explain some of the laughter: The student, along with more than a hundred of her classmates in a folklore survey course, had been required to attend the writing center by her instructor. She had made an appointment at the last minute, and as the paper was due the day after the tutorial, student and tutor were under considerable pressure. It was highly unlikely that the student would ever return to the writing center, especially to work with KZ, who was a composition tutor, not a subject-specific tutor. Is KZ with NSF then an outlier, or does the anomaly suggest that tutorials with hardly a chance of being repeated might evidence more laughter because they fall into a third category, one with no history or even hope of acquaintanceship but with familiarity that grows during the 50-min interaction nonetheless?

At the very beginning, the student sets up “the kind of a day that just nothing goes right” as a laughable:

(12)

- S: O.K. I wanted to let you know that, I, I've just told her, that I've had the, you know, that kind of a day that just nothing goes right, and I was going to go print out my paper
- T: uh-huh **((laugh))**
- S: but I grabbed the wrong disk, but I have a, I have a, a copy of it. (2s) I don't
- T: uh-huh o.k.
- S: think, I (.) I don't know if I'm doing it right. I think I am.
- T: O.K. You mean doing the assignment right?
- S: Uh-huh.

(KZ with NSF, Turns 1-2)

While the student is looking for her notes, the tutor engages in comembership talk (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993): KZ is a student, too, pushing paper:

(13)

- S: It's right here. I just had it.
- T: **((laugh))** It's getting to be that time in the semester when you have more paper [than you know what
- S: [Exactly! **((laugh))**
- T: to do with (3s).
- S: O.K. Somewhere. (3s) Oh, well.

(KZ with NSF, Turns 3-4)

During the diagnosis phase, the student confesses to having little experience writing in folklore, and the tutor asks for some background information to help her understand the student's concerns:

(14)

- T: So what do you want to look at with me today?
- S: Um well, I, I wasn't sure I was doing it right, correctly, and my, my writing, I haven't written a paper in a while. In the business school you kind of stop after awhile **((laugh))**.
- T: [o.k.

(KZ with NSF, Turn 13)

Somewhat later, the tutor encourages the student to make an appointment for the next day (with another tutor working at that time) while she reads her draft:

(15)

- S: I was going to see if I could make an appointment for tomorrow, too.
- T: O.K. Do you want, let's see. We could do that right now so that no one else takes whatever spot you're hoping to get. **((laugh))** Why don't you, if you want, why don't you run over there and talk to
- S: o.k. **((laugh))**
- T: David, and see if you can make one, and I'll keep reading this.
- S: Thank [you.
- T: [O.K.

(KZ with NSF, Turns 96-97)

During the directive phase of the tutorial, notice how in this case (as well as in others below) laughing *at* (the student's effort to reduce face threat to self for spelling *tale* as *tail*) quickly becomes laughing *with* (coordinated laughter):

(16)

- S: T-a-l-e. **((laugh))**
- T: Right, right, o.k. **((laugh))** So you can look for [that one. **((laugh))** Um let's see.
- S: **((laugh))** [yeah **((laugh))**

(KZ with NSF, Turn 105)

Later, the tutor and student create a series of laughables, resulting in coordinated laughter:

- (17)
- T: On the other hand, it may be hard to [connect them to each other if you haven't mentioned them all yet,
S: [yeah
T: [right? So ((laugh))
S: [yeah ((laugh)) “This [relates to the one I'm going to talk about three paragraphs
T: [((laugh))
S: [below,” right? (((laugh))
T: [right, right [Stay tuned. ((laugh)) Um
S: I guess, yeah.

(KZ with NSF, Turns 123–124)

They even engage in some dark humor around the student's tendency to choose interviewees as authorities who are not authoritative at all (and in this case, inanimate):

- (18)
- S: Actually I know, I know someone who lived in Ireland I could, I could call them up and get some
T: sure
S: information.
T: You know, and saying, you know, [I, “I interviewed Mary Jones who lived in Ireland,” that
S: [get some more information ((laugh))
T: way you could understand why, you know, as opposed to “I interviewed Kathleen Regan, who lives
[downstairs from me and never leaves her apartment,” you know (((laugh)) So now we know there's
S: [She's dead. ((laugh)) (((laugh))
T: some kind of authority here. (3s)
S: O.K. Now I've got it.

(KZ with NSF, Turns 150–151)

At the close of the tutorial, the student expresses gratitude and then launches into troubles talk, which continues for ten exchanges:

- (19)
- T: O.K. (.) All right. Well, um I guess we're done.
S: Thank you so much. [Now it's (.)
T: [Oh, sure! It was fun.
S: It's so much clearer.
T: O.K., ((laugh)) [good, good.
S: (((laugh))
--?-- I'll probably do, get a better grade on it ((laugh)) which is [exciting.
T: [You never know ((laugh))
S: This is, this is the best part of my day (((laugh))
T: [Really? Oh, [--?--.
S: [Yeah, I had a rough day.
T: Really? What [happened? (.)
S: (((laugh))
Well, I had a test this morning that I pulled an all-nighter for, and then I had um like to work on this
project that's due...

(KZ with NSF, Turns 161–167)

The role of laughter in this tutorial has moved beyond the mitigation of face threat; the coordinated laughter has become a resource in developing familiarity. As the tutorial progresses, coordinated laughter becomes more frequent, and most extended laughter occurs during the last third of the interaction.

8.3.2. MR with NSF

This tutorial is another interaction of interest with regard to the role of coordinated laughter in the construction of familiarity. Similarly to the tutorial between KZ and NSF, sequenced and simultaneous laughter occur, but here extended laughter sequences that index developing familiarity do not.

At the beginning, the tutor and student accomplish the diagnosis phase in one co-constructed utterance (a collaboration highly unusual for unacquainted pairs). They then do some face-threat reduction around the fact that the student has written twice as many pages as required while at the same time laughing at the perceived rudeness of the instructor's comments on the student's paper:

(20)

- T: All right, um your class is (.) func-, O.K. so it's a telecom class?
 S: Uh-huh.
 T: And um what kind of questions did you (.) have in mind or
 S: I just
 T: Do you just want me to
 S: All right, he wants it to be four to six pages long
 T: And it's ten pages long.
 S: Yeah. (((laugh)))
 T: [Yeah, I noticed that. (((laugh))) O.K. so you want to find a way to cut it down?
 S: Stuff that [I don't really think is necessary. But I also want to make sure that it really isn't necessary,
 T: [o.k.
 S: because I've researched it, so some of the [detail (((laugh)))
 T: [Boy, that's rude! (((laugh)))

(MR with NSF, Turns 1-6)

Coordinated laughter appears in two more instances in the tutorial, both towards the end. In (21), MR and NSF laugh about wording used in the paper; in (22), they laugh about her "weak" conclusion.

(21)

- T: Ah! (((laugh))) [No way! "Why do lyrics really matter? --?-- including but not limited to murder,
 S: (((laugh)))
 T: morbid violence, or the use of illegal drugs." [Man! (((laugh))) (3s)
 S: (((laugh)))

(MR with NS, Turn 12)

Here, laughter quickly becomes single-party in the student's attempt to mitigate threat to her own face:

(22)

- S: This conclusion is really weak. (((laugh)))
 T: Yeah, it is. (((laugh))) O.K.
 S: (((laugh))) I didn't know what else to say because (.) like I don't want to totally just
 re-say everything [and I'm not good at writing conclusions (((laugh)))
 T: [Right, well, the problem with this conclusion is that you just say, ["here you have to do
 S: (((laugh)))
 T: a bunch of stuff before you draw an educated conclusion," but you've already drawn an conclusion,
 you see, so um (.) and um, just all right, [let's, let's fix the conclusion.
 S: uh-huh (((laugh)))

(MR with NSF, Turns 23-24)

This tutorial ran less than half the time of that between KZ and NSF; it ended abruptly with no comembership interaction. We might hazard a guess that little familiarity was developed.

9. Conclusion

To summarize the study findings, overall laughter rates and the incidence of coordinated laughter supported the acquaintanceship hypothesis. In tutorials between unacquainted persons, the deployment of coordinated laughter, particularly occurring near the close of such interactions, constituted increasing familiarity.

The study results demonstrate that in the institutional context of the academic writing tutorial, laughing together is not as frequent as laughing separately; that is, in these transcripts single-party laughter was far more common than coordinated laughter. However, as no quantitative studies of coordinated vs. single-party laughter rates, to my knowledge, exist for "everyday" conversations, a comparison between mundane and institutional contexts is not yet

possible. What the results of this study do suggest is that the various types of “laughing together” in writing tutorials indicate participant alignments that “laughing alone” do not.

The study data evidenced a higher incidence of coordinated laughter in interactions between acquainted tutor–tutee pairs as compared to those between unacquainted pairs. Results also demonstrated that at least in this institutional setting, coordinated laughter serves affiliative purposes well beyond initial acquaintanceship, particularly when employed in status-leveling moves also mentioned by Zdrojkowski (2007). That “laughter in more escalated [=familiar?] relationships accomplishes other coordinating activities” (O’Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983, p. 191) is again relevant here. In practical terms, this study suggests to those who train tutors and to those who orient students to the writing center experience that “repeat” tutorials can build on acquaintanceship. In other words, it is not necessarily the case that a student’s repeated contact with the same tutor will result in more positive personal interaction. If laughter signals affiliation based on factors constitutive of familiarity, perhaps it is these factors, not only acquaintanceship or the frequency of contact with the same tutor, which occasion more positive personal interaction (Thonus, 2002, 2004).

Houts-Smith (2007) claimed that laughter, first a response to the incongruity of expectations with perceived reality, could also become a response to points of similarity. Laughter as a response to similarity, I believe, is what drives increasing familiarity and “successful” tutorials (Thonus, 2002). But do “successful” tutorials produce better student writing? Based on empirical research, Jessica Williams (2006) demonstrated that “clear connections [exist] between writing center sessions and the revisions that follow these sessions. . . a close relationship between both the nature and content of sessions and the extent of the revisions that followed” (p. 120). What we cannot yet claim is that successful tutorials produce “better writing” or “better writers” (North, 1984)—a claim often questioned when institutional budgets shrink and the writing center ends up on the chopping block. Conversations in writing tutorials, and the laughter in those conversations, can tell us a great deal about those tutors and those writers, the quality of the relationship between them. If quality of relationship produces quality of writing, as writing centers and educators in general have claimed all along, then perhaps we will have found, in Williams’ words, that “empirical research, effectively communicated, is the writing center’s best defense” (2006:121).

Appendix A. Transcription conventions

Utterance (linguistic) material is represented by conventional American English spellings for words and parts of words. Filled pauses (*um*, *hmm*) and listener responses (*Uh-huh*, *O.K.*, *Huh?*) are represented and treated as words. Conventional punctuation (periods, commas, question marks) signals basic intonation contours. Emphatic statements are marked by exclamation points. Overlaps between participant contributions are marked using brackets aligned directly above one another. Overlaps continue until one interlocutor completes his/her utterance. Then, one participant takes the floor again on a new line:

- S: Should I add that, maybe?
 T: O.K. But then so b and c, so then you say, or the legs, you’re saying that c is two things. It’s both the legs of the triangle [and the hypotenuse.
 S: [Oh, O.K., yeah. Thank you.
 ⇒ T: Ah, O.K. ((laugh)) I was thinking, “I don’t remember that, but it seems so wrong!”

Consistent with a vertically arranged transcript, multiple overlaps are sequenced spatially:

- T: Yes, yeah. (6s) You tend to use of um words like “incredibly”
 S: “Amazingly”
 T: And “amazingly” and
 “strangely” and stuff like that.

Backchannels, contributions made by one participant while the other maintains the floor, are inserted on the line just below, as are the student’s contributions (*uh-huh*):

- T: But the point is, I’m a reader who has not read the essay. I know what you’re, I have,
 S: uh-huh
 T: I know what your argument is here. I don’t feel, as a reader, I don’t feel that your, your paragraph
 S: uh-huh
 T: there is any better, has any more substance to it (.) with that quote in it
 S: uh-huh

Backchannels are written in lower-case form (*o.k.*) to distinguish them from listener responses (*O.K.*), as in the tutor’s utterances in the first excerpt above.

Nonutterance (nonlinguistic, paralinguistic) material is coded using these conventions:

(.)	Short pause (1-2 seconds)
(5s)	Timed pause (2+ seconds)
(())	Additional observation: laugh, cough, sigh, etc.
⇒	Turn(s) focused for analysis

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