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Béatrice Priego-Valverde

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Béatrice Priego-Valverde\*

# Failed humor in conversation: disalignment and (dis)affiliation as a type of interactional failure

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**Abstract:** This article reports on research on failed humor in French conversation. The aim is to investigate disalignment and (dis)affiliation as a type of interactional failure. For this purpose, 1,345 instances of humor were identified within a corpus of eight interactions in French. Among them, 259 were instances of failed humor, 158 of which were produced by the recipient, i.e., the participant who had taken the turn to produce humor. These 158 instances were analyzed using a method combining Conversation Analysis and corpus-based approaches. Conversation is seen as intrinsically dynamic: participants constantly shift between serious and humorous frames, different activities and different roles within them. In this light, each instance of failed humor was analyzed in relation to the frame and the type of activity within which it was embedded. All of the instances were found to be either disaligned and affiliated or disaligned and disaffiliated. Viewing conversation through its dynamism thus brings to light the ways in which disalignment and (dis)affiliation are a type of interactional failure. The analysis of three examples of disaligned and (dis)affiliated humor illustrates this type of interactional failure.

**Keywords:** conversation; (dis)affiliation; (dis)alignment; failed humor

## 1 Introduction

This article analyzes instances of failed humor in French conversations. Building on previous research in the fields of *Humor Studies and Conversational Analysis*, the present study aims to investigate an interactional type of failure: *disalignment and (dis)affiliation*. 158 instances of failed humor produced by the

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\*Corresponding author: Béatrice Priego-Valverde, Aix-Marseille Univ, CNRS, LPL, UMR 7309, Aix-en-Provence, France, E-mail: [beatrice.priego-valverde@univ-amu.fr](mailto:beatrice.priego-valverde@univ-amu.fr)

*recipient*<sup>1</sup> were analyzed taking into consideration the intrinsic dynamism of conversation, in which participants may constantly alternate between humorous and serious frames, or between different activities, which highlights the major role played by disalignment and (dis)affiliation. Thus, while disaligned humor may disrupt the ongoing activity, disaffiliated humor may change its frame. The analysis of three examples of disaligned and (dis)affiliated humor will illustrate this type of interactional failure.

## 1.1 Studies on failed humor

Failed humor has attracted increasing attention as a research subject since the 2000s. Over the years, failed humor has been studied within various contexts, including among non-native English speakers (Bell and Attardo 2010), public interactions (File and Schnurr 2019), computer mediated communication (Laineste 2013), movies (Bogdan 2014), and cartoons (Hale 2018). Failed humor in conversations between friends or close acquaintances (Hay 1995, 2001; Priego-Valverde 2003, 2009, 2020) has probably received the most attention. Studies in this context have centered on potential gender differences (Alvarado Ortega 2016; Bell 2009a; Hay 1995) or other sociolinguistic variables such as age and social relationships (Bell 2009a).

Failed humor can be considered both a “complex” (File and Schnurr 2019: 133) and “multifaceted” phenomenon (Bell 2015: 3). This is probably due to the fact that failed humor is very difficult to identify. Some of the frequent cues used to signal humor (such as laughter) are absent in the case of failed humor (Attardo 2008), and two humorous utterances produced with the same features (e.g., prosody) could fail in one case but succeed in another (Bell 2017). Therefore, the most effective way to distinguish failed humor is to identify it according to way the other participant(s) react to it. As such, failed humor in an interaction may be termed “unsupported or unappreciated” humor (Hay 2001: 61), “not appreciated” and not understood (Bell 2015:3), or “unperceived” or “rejected” (Priego-Valverde 2009).

Failed humor is thus more frequently viewed through various levels of *failure by the recipient*. For instance, Laineste (2013) attributes the lack of recognition of

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<sup>1</sup> In order to remove any confusion, a clarification on the term “recipient” is needed. Indeed, when the recipient produces humor, one can consider s/he is not the “recipient” anymore, because s/he is currently speaking. But here, the terms “recipient” and “speaker” refer to the participants’ role in the ongoing talk before the production of humor. In the examples analyzed here, the humorous items are produced by the participant who occupies the role of recipient in the ongoing activity initiated by the speaker (see Section 2.2.3 for the various activities).

humor in computer mediated communication to a lack of cues. Applying the relevance theory to humor, Zuo (2020) also investigates the various barriers to the interpretation and comprehension of humor. Bell and Attardo (2010) describe a model of seven “potential ‘failure points’” which make humor difficult to produce for non-native English speakers (2010: 430). Studies that address *both the speaker and the recipient’s failures* are far less frequent. Hay (1995, 2001) presents possibly the first of these studies. Hay considers failed humor as humor which is “not supported” (1995: 171), i.e., as defined by the way the recipient reacts to it, but her model of eight levels of failure refers more to the speaker’s failure than to the recipient’s. In contrast, by revising a previous model (Bell and Attardo 2010), Bell (2015) presents very complete framework of failed humor which includes different linguistic levels (such as semantic, pragmatic, and lexical levels) and which can involve both the speaker and the recipient. Finally, Bell (2015, 2017) builds on previous work to show the way failed humor is negotiated in an interaction both by the speaker and the recipient, and depending on whether it is recognized, understood and appreciated (based on the 4-stage model of humor support proposed by Hay (2001)). To date, most studies have focused on the recipient’s reactions to a speaker’s humor or the interactional negotiation of humor, but humor is also produced by recipients themselves when they take the turn from the speaker. Humor produced by recipients remains understudied thus far but represents a rich terrain for failed humor in particular.

The way in which participants produce and negotiate humor may also involve three potential characteristics failed humor: *impoliteness* (Alvarado Ortega 2016; Bell 2009b), *aggressiveness* (Hay 1995; Laineste 2013), and *disruptiveness*. In this last case, (failed) humor is used to either introduce a “play frame (Bateson 1953), change the topic, or keep or hold the floor (Bell 2013, 2015; Chiaro 1992; Hay 1995; Norrick 1993; Priego-Valverde 2020; Ruiz-Gurillo 2021; Sherzer 1978). This latter characteristic of (failed) humor brings to light the importance of participants’ actions, asymmetrical roles, and participation in activities that make up the organization of a conversation. As such, disruptiveness is involved in disaligned and (dis)affiliated humor.

## 1.2 Organization of conversation

Since the seminal work in *Conversation Analysis* (Sacks et al. 1974), conversation has been described as highly collaborative and ordered. The extensive work concerning its sequential organization (see Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008; Stivers 2013) has highlighted the fact that conversation is constituted of various kinds of actions and activities. While an “action” can be defined as the “‘main job’ that the turn is performing” (Levinson 2013: 107), such as asking, answering, offering and

so forth, an activity is broader and refers to “big package” actions (Jefferson 1988), such as argumentation, explanation, or storytelling. In line with this work, Stivers (2008) analyzes the teller’s and recipient’s actions during storytelling. To describe the way the recipient participates, Stivers (2008) develops two interactional notions: “alignment” and “affiliation”. These notions refer to structural and relational constraints that the recipient’s responses have to respect for the storytelling to be developed and delivered in the best conditions. An aligned response maintains the ongoing activity: “When a recipient *aligns* with a telling, he or she supports the structural asymmetry of the storytelling activity: that a storytelling is in progress and the teller has the floor until story completion. [...] Thus, *alignment* is with respect to the activity in progress” (Stivers 2008: 34).

Affiliation is a more social or relational concept: through *affiliation* “[...] the recipient displays support of and endorses the teller’s conveyed stance” (Stivers 2008: 35).

The notions of “alignment” and “affiliation” were conceptualized within the analysis of storytelling in conversation but, more generally, highlight *the dynamics of conversation, focusing on the way the recipient participates in the ongoing activity in order to facilitate it*. In line with previous research on failed humor identifying the interactional level as a potential point of failure (Bell 2015, 2017; Hay 1995, 2001), I thus expand the notions of alignment and affiliation in the present study to account for failed humor produced by recipients themselves, i.e., by the participants who take the turn in order to produce humor. Following a quantitative description of these instances of failed humor and their distribution in relation to conversational activities and frames, three examples of failed humor are analyzed. The analysis demonstrates how disaligned and (dis)affiliated humor fail: by disrupting (or not supporting) the asymmetrical roles in the activity, the recipient disaligns. This disalignment can be accompanied by either affiliation (here, by supporting the speaker’s frame) or disaffiliation (disrupting or changing frames), as I show below. The analysis thus illustrates how disalignment and (dis)affiliation together represent a type of interactional failure.

## 2 Corpus and methodology

### 2.1 Description of the corpus

The corpus analyzed in this study includes eight 1-h face-to-face interactions in French<sup>2</sup> (8 h of conversation). It was recorded in an anechoic room at a French

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<sup>2</sup> This article does not propose a cross-cultural comparison or a sociolinguistic analysis of the data, but this detail contextualizes the corpus.

university. Each speaker wore a microphone, and the two participants were filmed by a single camera. All the participants were native French speakers and were affiliated with the university (students, professors, researchers, or staff members). None of the participants were aware of the reasons for the recordings, and they all signed a consent form. The participants carried out two tasks: half of the participants were requested to tell stories about something unusual that had happened to them, while the others were asked to relate stories about conflicts they had experienced in their workplace. Despite the protocol and setting, the interactions can be considered to be very similar to natural conversations because of the context: the length of each recording (1 h) allowed the participants to deviate from the initial task; they were familiar with the anechoic room; and, most importantly, each pair of participants already knew each other to some degree, including outside of the university. The present article is based on the analysis of the whole corpus. The interactions were composed of either two male participants (three interactions) or two female participants (five interactions).<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Annotations of the data

### 2.2.1 Annotation of the audio signal

Each audio signal was automatically segmented into Inter-Pausal Units (IPU), i.e., blocks of speech bounded by silent pauses over 200 ms and time-aligned to the speech signal. An orthographic transcription was provided at the IPU-level to include all phenomena occurring in spontaneous speech (such as hesitations, repetitions, etc.). The *Enriched Orthographic Transcription* conventions were used (Blache et al. 2009).

### 2.2.2 Annotation of the humorous items

The humorous items were selected using several criteria. The first criterion was laughter, although the link between humor and laughter has proven to be tenuous,<sup>4</sup> especially in the case of failed humor. Although laughter can appear without humor and vice versa, laughter is still a first step – and just a first step – towards detecting humor. The second criterion was the participants' reactions to humorous items. Two kinds of reactions were distinguished: positive reactions (such as laughter, playing along (Hay 2001), or evaluative comments), and

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<sup>3</sup> The potential effect of gender was not analyzed.

<sup>4</sup> See Gironzetti (2017) for a complete overview.

negative reactions (ignoring the item, responding seriously, or rejecting it).<sup>5</sup> This classification of the various reactions was useful for two reasons: (1) it made it possible to classify humor as a failure or a success, (2) it helped refine the first selection of humorous items identified with laughter as a criterion. Items which received a reaction other than laughter were added, and others were excluded. The third criterion was the categorization of the linguistic devices used in each humorous item. Just as is the case for laughter, no single linguistic device can characterize humor, to the extent that “[...] humor makes extraordinary use of ordinary linguistic devices” (Attardo 2020: 153). However, their annotation helped confirm the selected item as humorous.

Various terms can refer to the elements that make up a humorous utterance:<sup>6</sup> e.g., “devices” (Mullan and Béal 2018; Priego-Valverde 2016), “features” (Haugh 2014), or “mechanisms” (Priego-Valverde 2003, 2016). In the present study, following Mullan and Béal (2018), the features that were detected can be classified into two broad categories: *linguistic features* and *discursive features*. These two categories include a large, heterogenous variety of practices. Linguistic features involve various linguistic levels such as prosody, phonetics, lexicon, syntax, or gestures. Discursive features are broader; they refer to various “strategies” (Mullan and Béal 2018) with which participants organize and stage their discourse, such as reported speech, fictionalization, allusion to shared knowledge, or “local logic” (Koestler 1980; Ziv 1984), also called “internal logic” (Mullan and Béal 2018). In the present study, because the wide variety of features of humor are not the focus, only the features involved in the humorous utterances analyzed will be described (see Section 4).

### 2.2.3 Annotation scheme

Each humorous item was manually annotated using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2009). The annotation scheme used is as follows: (see Figure 1).

Apart from the devices used in the humorous items and the reactions obtained, all the failed humorous utterances were annotated according to whether they appeared in a serious or humorous frame. A frame was considered serious when neither participant was producing any humor before the production of an initial humorous item. In this case, when a humorous item did appear, it leads to a switch from a serious to a humorous frame. A humorous frame was considered as such when an initial humorous item (produced in a serious frame) was accepted,

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<sup>5</sup> The reactions to humor are not the focus of this article. Thus, as for the features of humor, only the reactions.

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive discussion, see Mullan and Béal (2018).

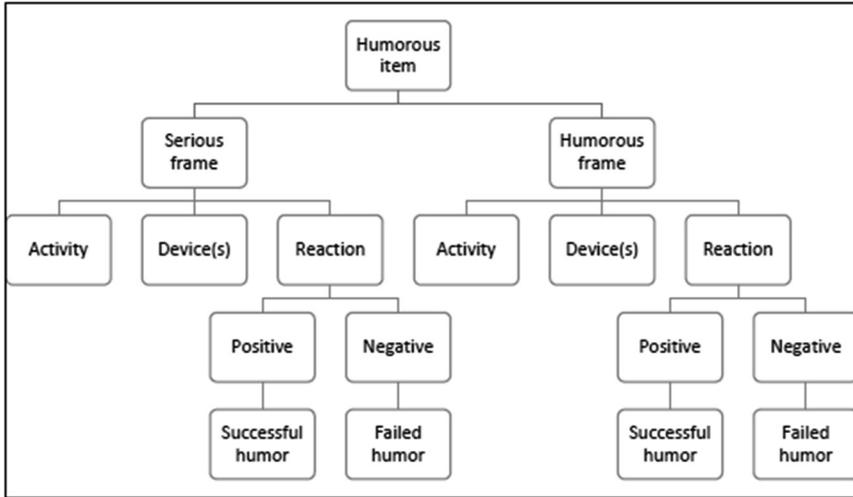


Figure 1: Annotation scheme.

allowing both participants to produce humor and/or to react positively to it (through laughter or playing along, for instance).

Finally, the type of conversational activity within which the failed humorous instances appeared was also annotated. Five activities were identified: storytelling, argumentation, explanation, side sequence and chit-chat. Following Strivers (2008), a *storytelling* is interactionally achieved by both the teller and the recipient. While the teller conveys a specific stance toward the event s/he is relating, the recipient participates in the development of the storytelling produced by the speaker. *Argumentation* is considered here very broadly; following van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004), an activity was annotated as an argumentation when the speaker developed a standpoint on a given subject. An activity was annotated as an *explanation* when the speaker was either clarifying a given point or reporting on it. This twofold goal brings explanation closer to argumentation, as pointed out by Antaki (1985), and to storytelling. A *side sequence* is considered a break in the ongoing topic and/or activity, composed of "...[O]ccurrences one might feel are not 'part' of that activity but which appear to be in some sense relevant" (Jefferson 1972: 294). Finally, following Traverso (1996, 2003) *chit-chat* corresponds to moments within a conversation where the participants are talking about anything and everything before a topic emerges. Contrary to the other conversational activities which can be considered asymmetrical<sup>7</sup> (participants are distributed in speaker

<sup>7</sup> The distinction between symmetry and asymmetry is less clear-cut in side sequences.

and recipient roles), chit-chat is a symmetrical activity where the participants' interactional roles are not determined.

### 3 Description of the quantitative data

This section describes the interactional context in which failed humor appears. The quantitative description of the humorous instances identified in the whole corpus is presented as follows:

- (1) the total number of successful and failed humorous occurrences; (2) the amount of failed humor produced by each participant when occupying the role of the recipient; (3) the distribution of failed humorous utterances within the five activities identified and according to whether they appear within a serious or a humorous frame.

#### 3.1 Number of (failed) humorous items in the corpus

Table 1 shows the number of humorous items and failed humorous items produced in each interaction. Out of a total of 1,345 instances of humor, 259 instances were failed humor.

While the interactions were all the same length, they contained a variable number of humorous items. More remarkably, there were almost five times more humorous items in the interaction between AP and LJ (the most prolific) as in the interaction between LL and NH (the least prolific). The reason for the difference is not the nature of the stories the participants told each other; in both cases, they

**Table 1:** Number and percentage of failed humorous items per interaction.

Participant	Failed humorous items	Total humorous items
AB_CM	35	200
'AC_N113	38	154
AG-fl	22	181
AP_LJ	88	249
BX_MG	72	208
EB_SR	5	163
LM_ML	41	141
LL_NII	8	49
Total	259	1,345

related professional conflicts. Rather, the difference could be due to the way participants appropriated the task. AP and LJ not only often digressed from the task, but they also frequently made fun of each other or other people while relating their conflicts.

By contrast, LL and NH appropriated the task very differently; over the course of nearly the entire interaction, one participant acted as if she were a psychotherapist asking her patient how she dealt with conflicts.

Table 2 shows the percentage of failed humor in the entire corpus and in each interaction. Failed humor is not a negligible phenomenon; it represents 19% of all the instances of humor produced. Again, the percentage of failed humor varies widely per interaction: the percentages range from only 4% for EB\_SR to 35% for AP\_LJ. The difference between these two interactions shows that, once again, AP\_LJ stand out from the crowd. Not only do AP\_LJ produce the most humor, but they also produce the most failed humor.

As in the case above of the numbers of humorous items, the considerable difference in the percentages of failed humor between the two pairs of participants cannot be accounted for by the task, as both of these pairs were also asked to relate professional conflicts. Here, the nature of the relationship between the participants could account for the difference. All the participants knew each other, but AP and LJ were the most closely acquainted. They worked together and were close friends outside the university, and so they spent a lot of time together. A close relationship could thus have a paradoxical effect, in the sense that “the more participants know each other, the more they feel authorized to treat negatively the humor produced, as if the stake of face was diminished” (Priego-Valverde 2020: 220). The relationship between EB and SR was more questionable. They knew each other better than some of the other participants did (they shared the same office and ate lunch together), but they did not spend time together outside the university. More importantly, their relationship was hierarchical: SR was a researcher while EB was a PhD student, and EB’s supervisor was one of SR’s closest friends. Interestingly, at one point in their conversation while EB is talking about the authoritative nature of supervisors in general, SR jokingly reminds EB who EB’s own supervisor is, without naming him explicitly. The supervisor appears like a shadow between them, reinforcing their hierarchical relationship.

**Table 2:** Percentage of failed humor in the 8 interactions.

AB_CM	AC_MB	AG_YM	AP_LJ	BX_MG	EB_SR	IM_ML	LL_NH	Total
18%	25%	12%	35%	11%	3%	29%	16%	<b>19%</b>

The bold value signifies the total of all the interactions.

### 3.2 Number of failed humorous items produced by the recipient

Table 3 shows that, in total, more humorous utterances which fail are produced when the participants occupy the role of recipient, even if there are considerable differences between the participants. While SR did not produce a single instance of failed humor when he was a recipient (he only produced two instances of failed humor total), LJ produced the vast majority of his utterances of failed humor when he occupied this position. 11 out of 16 participants produced more failed humor when they were the recipient.

### 3.3 Distribution of failed humorous items

Table 4 below shows the distribution of the failed humorous utterances produced by each recipient among the five activities identified, and whether these activities were produced in a humorous or a serious frame. These data are presented as follows: serious storytelling (St\_S), humorous storytelling (St\_H), serious argumentation (A\_S), humorous argumentation (A\_H), serious explanation (E\_S), humorous explanation (E\_H), serious chit-chat (C\_S), humorous chit-chat (C\_H), serious side sequence (Si\_S), and humorous side sequence (Si\_H).

Table 4 shows various trends:

- (1) No occurrence of failed humor appears in a humorous explanation.
- (2) Failed humor appears within all the other activities, performed both seriously and humorously, but the number of occurrences varies widely, ranging from two occurrences within a serious side sequence to 58 occurrences within a serious storytelling.
- (3) Over half of all the occurrences of failed humor appear during storytelling (both serious and humorous): 95/158.
- (4) The second most common activity in which failed humor occurs is chit-chat (33/158). These last two trends do not necessarily mean that humor is likely to fail in storytelling and chit-chat,<sup>8</sup> but their frequency could be explained by two characteristics of the corpus analyzed: the task assigned to the participants was to tell stories, and the participants were close acquaintances, which may have increased the amount of chit-chat they produced.
- (5) Finally, this table shows the distribution of the failed humorous utterances produced by the recipient within a serious or a humorous frame, all activities

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<sup>8</sup> Such a possibility would have to be investigated comparing successful and failed humor within these activities.

**Table 3:** Instances of failed humor produced by the recipient.

AB	CM	AC	MB	AG	YM	AP	LJ	BX	MG	EB	SR	IM	ML	LL	NH	Total
10/14	16/21	11/34	1/4	8/10	9/12	45/54	29/34	1/8	1/14	2/3	0/2	9/16	13/25	2/6	1/2	158/259

**Table 4:** Distribution of the recipient's failed humor among the activities.

	St_S	St_H	A_S	A_H	E_S	E_H	C_S	C_H	Si_S	Si_H	
All interactions	58	37	10	6	9		18	15	2	4	158
Serious frame											97
Humorous frame											61

combined. Not surprisingly, humor may fail within either a serious or a humorous frame. However, failed humor appears more often within a serious frame (97 occurrences) than within a humorous frame (61 occurrences), which represents a third more occurrences.

The next section details the analysis of three examples of failed humor produced by the recipient. The first example appears within a serious storytelling, while the second appears within a humorous storytelling. The last example appears within a side sequence. Examples 1 and 3 show how the recipient disaligns and disaffiliates by disrupting the ongoing activity in various ways and by introducing a play frame. In Example 2, by contrast, the recipient affiliates with the speaker by adopting the same humorous frame, but when the speaker shifts to a different humorous target, the recipient ends up disaligned with the speaker by disrupting his storytelling. This analysis shows that disalignment accompanied by disaffiliation or affiliation represents a type of interactional failure.

## 4 Sequential analysis of failed humor in conversation

### 4.1 Example 1. “brunette or blonde”

This excerpt is produced within a serious frame. It takes place during a long thematic sequence where the participants are speaking about their experiences with door-to-door salespeople. In the following lines, it is LJ's turn to tell a story about door-to-door salespeople. In this example,

AP's humor is disaligned because it disrupts LJ's ongoing storytelling. By introducing a new humorous frame, it is also disaffiliated.

1. LJ : j'aurais dit § non machin § mais y avait ma copine je sais pas j'ai je me 1 suis pas senti de

2. dire non tu sais comme ça bon pfutt j'ai laissé rentrer
  3. AP : t'étais avec qui↑
  4. LJ : et en fait le euh mais le + le plan euh brune
  5. →AP : **brune blonde**↑
  6. AP : **rousse**↑
  7. AP : **chauve**↑
  8. AP : **brune**↑
  9. LJ : le euh le plan c'était
  10. AP : **plutôt**:
  11. AP : **cuivrée**↑
  12. LJ : §on vous donne un dessin si on est en fait on sort de prison§ [...]
  13. AP : ah je connais le truc ouais ouais la réinsertion machin ouais
- 
1. LJ: i would have said §no or whatever§ but my girlfriend was there i don't know i didn't feel
  2. like saying no you know like that well pff i let him in
  3. AP: who↑ were you with
  4. LJ: and actually the uh but the + the scheme uh brunette
  5. →AP : **brunette blonde**↑
  6. AP: **redhead**↑
  7. AP: **bald**↑
  8. AP: **brunette**↑
  9. LJ: the uh the scheme was
  10. AP: or was she
  11. AP: **copper-haired**↑
  12. LJ: §we'll give you a drawing if we are actually we just got out of jail§ [...]
  13. AP: oh yeah i know about that yeah yeah rehabilitation stuff yeah

In lines 1–2, LJ relates how one day a door-to-door salesperson came to his door, selling drawings; LJ let him in, although he did not want to. He justifies his action by the fact he was with his girlfriend, without naming her. While LJ is in the middle of saying that he should have refused, AP rebounds on the word “girlfriend” in overlap (l.3) to try to find out her identity. His question is not necessarily humorous; LJ ignores the question and continues explaining how he regrets having let the salesperson in (l.1, 2). In line 5, various elements point to AP’s question about the girlfriend’s physical appearance as the moment when AP switches into a humorous frame. From line 5 to 11, AP (a) uses a low and sing-song tone of voice to ask his questions; (b) he keeps asking questions, even after LJ answers one of them (l.4); AP asks four more questions after LJ’s reply and before LJ takes the turn to pursue his story (see 1.12); (c) he lists a number of possible hair colors, until he reaches a

possibly absurd prospect (l. 7 “bald”); (d) he then repeats his initial question (l. 8, “brunette”), whereas LJ had already confirmed that his girlfriend was a brunette (l. 4); (e) AP asks some of his questions in overlap, while LJ is in the middle of answering one of them (l.4-6) and starting his story over again by repeating his last utterance (l.9 “the scheme”). Overlapping can be an indicator of successful humor when both participants are producing humor, i.e., sharing the same humorous frame (see Example 2). Here, however, the overlapped utterances are not produced within the same frame (humorous for AP, serious for LJ); each participant continues on their own, without considering the other’s frame. AP keep asking questions, while LJ first answers AP seriously (l.4), i.e., without considering the humorous frame, and then ignores all the following utterances (l. 6, 7, 8, 10). Finally, LJ can pursue his story (l. 12), producing reported speech acting out the salesperson. AP falls in line (l.13). He abandons his humorous frame and answers LJ’s story seriously.

Starting from line 2, AP disaligns with LJ. By asking a question about LJ’s girlfriend, he introduces the possibility of disrupting the ongoing story by changing the main character of LJ’s story. From line 5 on, AP then explores the matter of LJ’s girlfriend in more depth, although he has already received an answer. In doing so, he makes LJ’s girlfriend the topic of his utterances, though LJ is speaking about the salesperson (l.12). By focusing on LJ’s girlfriend and not on the characters and events of LJ’s story, AP disaligns with LJ. He also disaffiliates by switching into a humorous frame. This switch also involves a change of target: insisting about LJ’s girlfriend could be also a way to tease LJ. In sum, the combination of switching frames, topics and targets simultaneously leads to disaffiliation and disalignment.

AP’s humor appears while LJ is engaged in a serious storytelling and is thus the main speaker. In this type of asymmetrical activity, the teller is supposed to have “the floor until story completion” (Stivers 2008:34). Moreover, LJ is in the “orientation” phase (Labov and Waletzky 1966), i.e., the beginning of the story where he is supposed to present the characters in his narrative and the events that took place, while the recipient “is supposed to listen to the story while providing feedback showing ratification of the teller in this role [...]” (Guardiola and Bertrand 2013: 2). Within this activity, AP’s attempts at humor could be seen as a strategy to take over as speaker, or at least as co-speaker of the narration. In other words, AP’s attempts at humor appear to be a way to modify the interactional orientation of the storytelling.

## 4.2 Example 2. “the pasta”

This example appears within a humorous frame. Just before the excerpt, the two participants are taking turns recalling events that occurred when they were students in a foreign country. In this example, it is AG’s turn. He begins a story by saying that he shared an apartment with other students of different nationalities when he was studying in England. While AG initially frames his story as humorous, he then modifies its humorous orientation. He starts by making fun of one character of his story, an Eritrean student, but progressively, he orients towards self-deprecating humor. YM’s humor remains directed toward the student, however, so it the humor ends up failing due to YM’s disalignment with AG, the storyteller.

1. AG : et donc euh nous nous on en bouffait vach(e)ment de pâtes donc euh 1 du coup (on) en
  2. faisait souvent et après ça lui plais- {voix souriante}et après i(l) f(ai)sait p(l)us qu(e) des pâtes
  3. AG : \*
  4. YM : @ il adorait les pâtes
  5. AG : @
  6. AG : {voix souriante}il avait (a)dorait ça + a(l)ors il f(ai)sait des pâtes à tout d’ailleurs hein
  7. →YM : **i(l) parlait italien après @**
  8. AG : et euh p(u)tain une fois je me rappelle il a(v)ait fait des pâtes avec des 8 + des des épices
  9. de chez lui
  10. YM : **pâtes au chocolat**
  11. YM : @
  12. AG : ah attend on a
  13. AG : <expiration> ah
  14. YM : @
  15. AG : {voix souriante} t(u) sais on était comme ça \$ah mh c’est bon hein\$ et lui il bouffait ça
  16. tu sais comme ça
  17. YM: @
  18. AG : et lui il bouffait ça tu sais comme ça
- 
1. AG: and so uh we we we ate tons of pasta so uh so we’d cook it a lot and after that he liked it
  2. {smiling voice} and from then on he only cooked pasta
  3. AG: \*

4. YM: @ he loved pasta
5. AG: @
6. AG: {smiling voice} he loved it + so he cooked pasta with everything actually huh
7. YM: **he could speak Italian after that @**
8. AG: and uh shit once i remember he cooked pasta with some + some some spices from his
9. country
10. YM: **chocolate pasta**
11. YM: @
12. AG: ah wait we
13. AG: <expiration> ah
14. YM: @
15. AG: {smiling voice} you know we were like §<expiration> ah it's good huh§ and he was eating
16. it you know just like that
17. YM: @
18. AG: and he he was eating it you know just like that

In this excerpt, AG is developing a humorous storytelling. Up to line 5, the two participants are on the same wavelength: they are making fun of the same target, an Eritrean student AG shared an apartment with when he was in England. But from line 6 on, the humorous trajectory of both participants diverges. While AG lays the groundwork to change the target of his humor from the foreign student to himself (as shown in the following lines of the transcript, starting from l.12), YM continues to make fun of the student.

Starting in line 1, AG relates how an Eritrean student started to cook “only” pasta as soon as he had discovered it. From lines 1 to 6, the humor produced by both participants is successful; the participants both align and affiliate with each other’s humor. In line 1, AG frames his story as humorous, using a smiling voice and perhaps exaggeration to describe the Eritrean student cooking only pasta. In l.4, YM aligns and affiliates with AG by laughing and summarizing AG’s utterance (“he loved pasta”), producing almost the same utterance as AG (l.6 “he loved it”). AG and YM’s humorous utterances are produced in overlap. Contrary to Example 1, here, since both participants are already sharing the same humorous frame and the same target of their humorous utterances (the foreign student), the overlapping suggests humorous cooperation. At that moment, because AG’s humorous storytelling is oriented toward targeting the foreign student, and because YM slips into this mold, their humorous utterances succeed.

But from line 6 on, AG's trajectory of the humor he produces changes. His utterance "cooked pasta with everything" (l.6) could be considered a way for him to prepare a change in the target of his humor, shifting from the student to himself (see l.12). However, in overlap, YM keeps targeting the student in his next humorous utterance (l.7). From there, the humorous trajectory shared by the two participants splits into two separate ones. While AG prepares his next utterance of self-deprecating humor, YM (l.7) produces a sequence of reasoning by the absurd, portraying a student who loves pasta so much that he ends up speaking Italian. This utterance, framed as humorous by laughter, is certainly affiliated with AG's humorous frame, but it is disaligned since it disrupts AG's ongoing construction of humor with a new target (himself). In fact, in l.8, AG ignores YM's humor and keeps laying the groundwork to change the target of his own humor, making his previous utterance more specific ("everything" becoming "with spices"). But as previously in line 9, again in overlap with AG's humor, YM produces a new humorous utterance targeting the student ("chocolate pasta"). Once again, while this humorous utterance could have fit with AG's humor in l.6 ("pasta with everything"), at that moment it is disaligned with AG's attempts to change the target of his humor. Accordingly, in line 12, AG explicitly rejects YM's humor ("ah wait we"), in order to portray himself as not being able to breathe (l.13) because of the spicy taste of the pasta made by the Eritrean student. Finally, in l.14, YM aligns and affiliates with AG by laughing, which allows AG to continue his story in a self-deprecating mode (l.15,16), which is, once again, answered with laughter (l.17). In this example, while YM affiliates with AG by sharing the same humorous frame, he ultimately disaligns with AG: YM disrupts AG's storytelling activity by not following the new humorous orientation AG gives to his narration.

### 4.3 Example 3. "the newspaper"

This excerpt takes place just after a short transitional moment when the participants are speaking about the recording which they are participating in. The first humorous item appears within a serious frame. As it succeeds, the other items appear within a humorous frame. The first humorous item is produced by LJ. It does not appear in a storytelling but within a side sequence initiated by LJ, who interrupts himself just after having begun a storytelling – a demonstration of frequent frame shifting which often occurs in conversation. Although the humor succeeds in the initial part of the sequence, the recipient ends up disaligned and disaffiliated with the speaker due to the shift in frame, and the humor that the recipient produces at this point fails, as in Example 2.

1. LJ: j'ai enten- j'ai lu un truc aussi / ah mais tu l'avais acheté là le *Courrier 1 International*↑
2. AP: ouais j'avai- ouais
3. → LJ: tu l'as lu↑
4. AP: @ ouais ouais ben j'ai terminé hier là
5. LJ: ouais
6. LJ: @ {voix souriante} c'est bien hein
7. AP: @
8. AP: oh mais c'est dur attends euh les articles suisses ou:: + les articles russes ils
9. LJ: euh {voix souriante} surtout le style et tout
10. AP : **sont durs à lire hein**
11. LJ: mais euh dans les dans les faits divers à la fin y a un truc je cr- euh je crois sur un
12. LJ: un u- un pédopsychiatre ou un truc comme ça enfin un mec qui s'occupe de gamins
13. vachement célèbre au au Brésil

1. LJ: i hea- i read something also / ah but did you buy the *Courrier 1 International*↑
2. AP: yeah i did- yeah
3. → LJ: did you read it↑
4. AP: @ yeah yeah uh i finished yesterday
5. LJ: yeah
6. LJ: @ {smiling voice} it's good huh
7. AP: @
8. AP: oh but it's hard i mean uh the swiss articles or:: + russian articles **they're hard to read**
9. **huh**
10. LJ: uh {smiling voice} especially the style and all that
11. LJ: but uh in the in the miscellaneous news items at the end there's
12. something i the- i think about a
13. LJ: about a child psychiatrist or something like that well a guy who works with children he's
14. really famous in in Brazil

In line 1, LJ starts a storytelling, but he interrupts himself to ask AP if he bought a newspaper (*Courrier International*) where LJ read the news item he wants to talk about. In doing so, as the main speaker of the projected narration, LJ creates a “side sequence” (Jefferson 1972) where he checks AP's knowledge to make sure that he

can understand the story. When AP answers that he had indeed bought the newspaper (l.2), LJ clarifies his question by asking if AP read it (l.3). This utterance can be considered the first humorous item, as LJ's question (l.3), is based on two different kinds of shared knowledge. The first one concerns the newspaper itself and its reputation in France. *Courier International* is a weekly newspaper which mainly contains French translations of articles published in the foreign press. The newspaper has a good reputation, and people think it is a good idea to say that they read it regularly. The second piece of shared knowledge is precisely the fact that some people buy it (or say they do) but do not read it. By asking this question, LJ switches into a humorous frame, implying that AP did not read the newspaper. Both the switch into a humorous frame and the innuendo is accepted by AP (l.4): he laughs and plays along with LJ's allusive question, going so far as to say he has just finished reading the newspaper. Although this could be true, both the laughter produced and the rest of the conversation show that AP creates a pretense (Dyrel 2014): he acts as if he has read the newspaper, targeting both himself, as perhaps he has not read it, and French people in general who pretend to read it regularly. In doing so, he aligns and affiliates with LJ. After a short positive feedback marker (l.5), LJ aligns and affiliates in turn with AP. He laughs and produces a humorous comment ("it's good huh", l.6) using a smiling voice. Similar to AP's humorous claim (l.4), this comment could be both a way to play along with AP's pretense and a way to target French people who pretend to read the newspaper. This utterance is accepted as humorous by AP who laughs (l.7). Moreover, in (l.8), he accentuates his pretense by listing Swiss and Russian articles, as if he is used to reading them either in their original versions or with translations which are very close to the original version ("they're hard to read"). In (l.10),<sup>9</sup> LJ mode adopts (Attardo 2001) with AP's pretense about the Swiss articles. In overlap with AP's humor, he humorously shares the difficulties of reading these articles, pretending to do it himself ("especially the style and all that"). But at that moment, whereas AP continues his utterance in a humorous way ("they're hard to read huh"), LJ modifies the orientation of his discourse. And in overlap with AP's last humorous utterance ("they're hard to read huh"), LJ turns serious again in (l. 11, "but uh in the in the miscellaneous...") and starts to tell the story that he probably started to tell in (l.1). This leads him to ignore AP's last humorous utterance, which then fails.

At first glance it appears that no obvious reasons can explain why AP's last utterance fails in this excerpt. The utterance is produced within a humorous frame

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<sup>9</sup> Lines from English transcription.

which was accepted and shared by both participants; the target of the last item did not change (AP and possibly French people); and the humor is still being produced in the same manner, as a pretense. However, the dynamics of the conversation and its frequent frame shifting could explain the failure. LJ began a storytelling but interrupted it himself, which allowed both participants to create a humorous sequence. But AP as the recipient was on shaky ground, as their roles were still asymmetrical: LJ abruptly became serious again to pursue his narration. AP's humor appeared when LJ shifted frames – he became serious and was starting to tell his story again. In other words, while AP's humor aligned and affiliated with previous utterances, at that moment it was disaligned and disaffiliated with LJ's utterance which allowed LJ to pick up his story where he had left off.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

This study on failed humor in conversation was conducted on an eight hour-long corpus of conversational data. 1,345 instances of humor were extracted from the corpus. Among them, 259 instances of failed humor were identified. In order to investigate *disaligned and (dis)affiliated humor as a type of interactional failure*, the methodology used was twofold: (1) the selection of the instances of failed humorous instances produced by the participant who occupied the role of recipient, i.e., 158 occurrences, (2) the analysis of these occurrences in relation to the organization and the dynamics of the conversation, i.e., according to which activity they were embedded in, and whether these activities were produced in a humorous or serious frame. The five activities were: storytelling, argumentation, explanation, side sequence and chit-chat.

The quantitative description of the data shows various trends. (1) failed humor is not a negligible phenomenon (19%), (2) failed humor is more frequent when it is produced by the recipient than the speaker (158/259), (3) failed humor is more frequent within a serious frame than a humorous frame (97/61), (4) except for humorous explanation, failed humor appears within all the other activities, whether they are performed within a serious or a humorous frame, (5) the two activities where failed humor appears the most frequently are storytelling and chitchat (both humorous and serious).

In the sequential analysis of the three excerpts, the interactional notions of “alignment” and “affiliation” (Stivers 2008) were applied to humor. Since these notions highlight the way that the participants collaborate depending on whether they are the speaker or recipient and on the type of activity they are engaged in, their application to failed humor highlights that disalignment and disaffiliation, or disalignment and affiliation represent a type of interactional failure.

In the first example, failed humor appears within a serious storytelling and while the teller is already engaged in his narration. The analysis showed that all the instances of humor were both disaffiliated, by introducing a play frame while the teller was serious, and disaligned by disrupting the storytelling. The failure of all these instances were demonstrated by the reactions obtained: they were responded to seriously in one case, and simply ignored in the others.

The second example analyzed failed humor appearing within a humorous storytelling. This example highlighted the dynamics of the conversation insofar as it showed how humor can go from success to failure. While the first successful utterances of humor produced by the recipient were aligned and affiliated with the teller's humorous story targeting one of the characters of his storytelling, the last one failed. Indeed, progressively, the teller changed the orientation of his storytelling, from making fun of another person to self-deprecating humor. Thus, while the recipient still affiliated with the teller by sharing the same humorous frame, he ended up disaligning with him by not following the new humorous orientation he gave to his narration. His humorous utterance was ultimately rejected.

As in Example 2, in Example 3, the first humorous items produced by both participants succeeded; only the last one failed. This excerpt exemplified the frequent frame shifting in conversation, appearing within a side sequence introduced by the teller himself. Indeed, the teller began a storytelling but interrupted it himself, which allowed both participants to create a humorous sequence. Within this sequence the recipient's humor was aligned and affiliated.

But when the teller became serious again, the last humorous utterance produced by the recipient, although still aligned and affiliated with previous utterances, became disaligned and disaffiliated with the teller's serious utterance. It was ultimately ignored.

This study does not make disalignment and disaffiliation responsible for all instances of failed humor. Needless to say, humor can succeed despite – and sometimes thanks to – the disalignment and disaffiliation it introduces. However, analyzing in-depth examples of failed humorous instances which are disaligned and (dis)affiliated with respect to both the dynamics of conversation, (i.e., frequent frame shifting) and its sequential organization, (i.e., the activity in which failed humor is embedded), allows us to better understand why disaligned and disaffiliated humor as well as disaligned and affiliated humor can represent a type of interactional failure. In other words, the present study attempts to shed light on the way both humor and conversation function, and on the way that *a conversation may shape the way humor appears*.

## Transcription conventions

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@	Laughter
{smiling voice}	Before the segment concerned
:	Vocalic extension
+	Silent pause
↑	Rising tone
a-	Truncated word
§word§	Reported speech
<u>underlined word</u>	Overlap
/	Self-interruption
*	Undetermined noise
→ s	Witch into a humorous frame
In bald	Instance of failed humor

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## Bionote

### Béatrice Priego-Valverde

Aix-Marseille Univ, CNRS, LPL, UMR 7309, Aix-en-Provence, France

[beatrice.priego-valverde@univ-amu.fr](mailto:beatrice.priego-valverde@univ-amu.fr)

Béatrice Priego-Valverde is Associate Professor at Aix-Marseille University, Aix-en-Provence, France and Laboratoire Parole et Langage (CNRS). Her area of research is mostly humor in conversation she analyzes within Interactional Linguistics and Conversation Analysis frameworks. She has published on (failed) humor in conversation, self-deprecating humor and teasing in conversation.