Humor and laughter are emotion-involving activities that can be jointly constructed in interaction. This article analyzes instances of joint laughter in leader-member meetings where laughter may or may not be associated with humor. The method applied is conversation analysis in which the focus lies on laughter’s role in the microlevel organization of interaction. The results show that the instances of laughter do not occur in accidental locations but are clearly connected to specific activities. First, humor and laughter can be strategically used by team leaders to create collegiality and a good working atmosphere in their teams. Second, laughing together is connected to closing down a topic or a phase in a meeting in a way that displays mutual understanding. Third, shared laughter initiated by team members appears to be a resource that can be used to reduce tension in challenging situations such as the accomplishment of difficult tasks or the treatment of delicate topics. Finally, laughing together can be used to do remedial work in problematic or conflicting situations. Ultimately, joint laughter appears to be a resource that can be used to improve the task performance and, through this, the achievement of the goals of the organization.

Keywords: organizational communication; meeting interaction; laughter; humor; emotion; conversation analysis

Emotion is a relatively new but rapidly growing area of study within organizational research (Campbell, White, & Johnson, 2003; Fineman, 2000, 2003; Madlock, 2008). Until quite recently, however, the emotional behavior of organizational actors was thought to lie in the periphery of the organizational research. As noted in many studies (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fineman, 2000, 2003), one reason for this aversion was that both
the organizational researchers and the practitioners largely regarded emotion as the antithesis of rationality, and this led to a negative perception of emotion and a neglect of its positive functions. According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), organizations even lack a vocabulary for discussing emotional activities.

There is nowadays wide agreement among the researchers in the field of organization and business communication studies on two issues: first, that emotions play an important role in organizations and, second, that rationality and emotion are not the antitheses of each other but intertwined in many different ways (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fineman, 2000, pp. 10–12; Madlock, 2008). For example, a strong professional motivation is not considered to be possible without an emotional engagement in the work. Leaders are, however, often unaware of the role the emotion plays in their seemingly rational decision making. A very crucial area of the study of emotion in organizations is the leader-member interaction: It is claimed that leadership is enacted through communication in such a way that it always contains an affective, relational component and a task component (Campbell et al., 2003; Madlock, 2008).

Emotion in organizations is studied in many different disciplines: for example, by sociologists, applied psychologists, and the representatives of management literature, including business communication (for a detailed overview of the field, see Ashkenasy, Hartel, & Zerbe, 2000; Fineman, 2000; Fineman & Sturdy, 1999). In the area of workplace studies, research on emotion has, however, largely focused on affective states such as stress, satisfaction or boredom, or just positive or negative feelings (Fineman, 2000, p. 19). Furthermore, a large part of the research is made through interviews in which people describe their emotions. Consequently, this research has been criticized for neglecting both the context of the emotional experiences and the impact of the interviewing situation on the descriptions (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). The critique has led to an increase of “real time” emotion studies using, for example, participatory observation (Fineman, 2000, p. 14).

Still, an area of emotion research that is poorly covered is the study of real-time natural interactions using recorded data. This research concerns particularly leader-member interactions in organizations. The lack of studies in this area has been noted in several recent studies (Campbell et al., 2003; Fineman, 2000, pp. 13–14; Holmes, 2006; Samra-Fredericks, 2004). For example, Campbell et al. (2003) conclude that “management communication researchers could add much to this research area by focusing on conversations between leaders and members” (p. 22). The present article, for its
part, is a contribution in this area. It focuses on one form of emotional behavior in organizational context: joint laughter in workplace meetings.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON HUMOR AND LAUGHTER**

In research on laughter, humor and laughter are usually linked to each other. Incidents of laughter are often explained through three major theories of humor—that is, the theories of superiority, incongruity, and relief (Adelswärd, 1989; Duncan, 1983; Greatbatch & Clark, 2003; Haakana, 1999). Superiority theories regard laughter as means of expressing superiority by laughing at others, whereas incongruity theories relate laughter to surprise following the perception of a clash or incongruity. Relief theories, in turn, explain laughter as a release of repressed emotion such as tension or stress. Empirical studies also indicate that humor and laughter have important functions such as creating group solidarity (Coser, 1959; Meyer, 2000), enhancing self-esteem at the expense of others (Collinson, 2002), gaining approval by others (Meyer, 2000), managing embarrassment or stress (Vinton, 1989), and expressing opposition (Collinson, 1988; Mulkay, 1988). As Norrick (1993) has noted, these studies neglect, however, one crucial aspect: They do not attend to the practices through which humor and laughter are produced, interpreted and coordinated in naturally occurring encounters (see also Greatbatch & Clark, 2003).

**Humor and Laughter: Connected But Different Social Phenomena**

In recent years, an increase in studies examining laughter in its interactive contexts can be observed (Haakana, 1999; Glenn, 1989; Greatbatch & Clark, 2003; for an overview, see, Glenn, 2003). These studies analyze the practices and procedures through which people routinely invite, recognize, and respond to laughter and other humor-related actions. The social character of laughter and the importance of a microlevel analysis of its functions were, in fact, emphasized in very early sociological and philosophical studies. For example, the philosopher Henri Bergson writes in his classical book *Laughter* (1911/2005) that “to understand laughter, we must put it back to its natural environment—and determine—its function which is a social one” (pp. 8–9). Still, such studies are rare in the field of business communication.
Although laughter is, as noted above, typically associated with amusement and humor, several conversation analytic studies (Haakana, 1999; Jefferson, 1984) have shown that laughter also occurs in conjunction with phenomena such as troubles telling, shame, or embarrassment. In such cases, laughter can be viewed as a sign of the problematic nature of the situation and the awareness of the parties of the problems, but it may also function as a remedial device that contributes to getting over the difficulties. Laughing together and laughing alone in social contexts also seem to be quite different activities (Glenn, 1989, 2003). For example, unilateral laughter is found to be much more commonly connected to problematic activities than laughing together (Haakana, 1999, pp. 135–137). In business contexts in particular, joint laughter is associated with consensus and rapport (Adelswärd & Öberg, 1998).

Research on Humor and Laughter in Workplace Meetings

Studies on laughter in workplace meetings usually treat laughter as an expression of humor, associating it with solidarity and positive affect that contribute to constructing and maintaining good relations with fellow workers. In some studies, this function is linked to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) concept of humor as a positive face strategy (Holmes, 2000, 2006; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Vuorela, 2005). According to Holmes, much of the research on humor in the workplace focuses on demonstrating its contribution to organizational goals such as improving job performance and satisfaction, encouraging creativity, or defusing conflict among workers (Homes, 2000, p. 160; Holmes, 2006, p. 29). Holmes (2000) criticizes this research both for its normative approach and for reliance on methods such as questionnaires and surveys, neglecting the detailed microlevel study of natural interactions.

Still, there are also workplace studies that do not only concentrate on the positive functions of humor. For example, Rogerson-Revell (2007) found that in internal managerial meetings of an international airline corporation, humor was frequently related to shifts from formal to informal style, which were strategically used both to include and to exclude participants. Hence, humor was used as a double-edged sword, favoring collaboration and inclusion on the one hand, and exclusion on the other. In business meetings with customers, the functions of humor and laughter may also differ from those observed in company-internal meetings (Adelswärd & Öberg, 1998; Vuorela, 2005). For example, in negotiations
between sellers and buyers, joking seemed to be related to power relations (Vuorela, 2005), and in international negotiations, unilateral laughter was used by participants who were at a disadvantage in the negotiation (Adelsvärd & Öberg, 1998).

Adelsvärd and Öberg’s study (1998) is one of the few studies of business meetings where laughter, instead of humor, is the focus of study and where it is investigated as an interactional phenomenon, using conversation analytic methods. Their findings have also relevance for the present study, even if their database consisted of company-external negotiations. For instance, joint laughter was found to function as a boundary marker between the different phases of the negotiation activity, and it was also used to signal what topics were regarded as important or sensitive.

**DATA AND METHOD**

Data

The data used for this study were collected as part of a research project on internal communication in two large Finnish-Swedish corporations that was carried out at the Helsinki School of Economics in 2000–2003 (for more details, see Charles, 2007; Kangasharju, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). The majority of the recordings were made soon after the merger of the Finnish and Swedish units in 2000 and 2001. The main criterion for selecting the meetings was that they should be as “normal internal meetings” as possible. The participants in the meetings were also free to delete any recorded material according to their wishes, but such deletions were extremely rare. Permission was also given by the participants for using the data for research purposes.

The whole database consists of about 35 hours of videotaped internal meetings of either national teams or cross-border Finnish-Swedish teams. The data used for the present study originate from five cross-border meetings (approximately 16 hours), where the participants used English as *lingua franca* (see also Charles, 2007). The length of the meetings varies from 1 hour to almost 6 hours, and the number of participants varies between 4 and 10. Based on Boden’s (1994) rough division between formal and informal meetings, the meetings can be characterized as semiformal. Characteristics such as a rather large number of participants, the use of a chairperson and a fixed agenda mark them as formal, whereas a rather casual conversation style (demonstrated, for instance, by joint laughter) and free turn taking mark them as informal. The overall purpose of the
meetings was mainly sharing information or solving joint problems. All were meetings of regular teams.

The cases discussed in this article represent a larger collection of instances from the whole database. The examples were chosen on the basis of three criteria. First, they represent typical sequential environments where joint laughter occurs in the whole database. Second, the examples are taken from interactions where the Finnish and Swedish merger partners met, which brings an extra aspect in the analysis of shared laughter. Previous research (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Vaara, 2003) emphasizes the crucial role that emotions play in mergers and acquisitions, which bring together people representing different national and organizational cultures and in which it is particularly important to create a feeling of community and collegiality. Third, it was regarded as an advantage that the language used in the extracts was English and no translations from Finnish or Swedish into English were needed. In the process of translation, the delicate nuances of humor can easily be lost.

Research Questions

The earlier research reviewed for the purposes of this study suggests a gap in the area of microlevel research on the display of emotion in leader-member interaction. Within this area, the focus of our interest is particularly shared laughter in meeting interaction. Based on the literature reviewed and the gap in the prior research, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What different functions does joint laughter have in leader-member meetings?
2. What kind of activities in the meeting is the joint laughter connected to?
3. How are the laughing sequences constructed by the meeting participants, and what kind of interactional practices do they use when accomplishing this activity?

Method

Our data analysis uses the approach of conversation analysis (CA; see also Introduction in this volume). Conversation analysis research does not entail the empirical testing of a priori hypotheses; instead, the analysis is based on the verbal and nonverbal interaction of the meeting participants. Extracts of detailed transcripts are included in the analysis section to demonstrate the interactional phenomena under investigation.
The present article draws on the view presented by Goodwin and Goodwin (2000) according to which the relevant unit for the analysis of emotional phenomena such as laughter is the sequential organization of action in naturally occurring interactions. Consequently, the method applied in this article is a descriptive analysis of the placement of laughter in conversational sequences extracted from the meeting data described above. Laughter is seen as a phenomenon in the way CA researchers see it (i.e., as a recurrent pattern of a social activity that is methodically produced by the meeting participants; Glenn, 1989; Haakana, 1999; Jefferson, 1985; Sacks & Jefferson, 1992). Conversation analysis as a research method is based on the assumption that when uttering their turns-at-talk, the participants in a conversation at the same time display their analysis and interpretation of the prior talk. This turn-by-turn analysis by the participants is also available to the analyst, and it is this sequential process we base our analysis of laughter in this article upon.

ANALYSIS OF LAUGHTER SEQUENCES

Occurrences of joint laughter are studied here in conjunction with three different meeting activities: the opening of a meeting, the assignment of demanding work tasks, and the treatment of a problematic, face-threatening issue. In some cases, laughter is clearly linked to humor and amusement, in some cases not.

Joint Laughter Invoked By the Manager in the Opening Phase Of A Meeting

In-house meetings of an organization are important sites for sharing knowledge and for discussing ideas and initiatives that gradually develop into future plans and decisions of the organization (Boden, 1994; Senge, 1990/2006). Activities of this type greatly benefit from a working climate that fosters collegiality and equal opportunities to participate in the discussions. Following Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), we claim that humor and laughter can be used, even strategically, by the managers to enhance the collegiality of a working team and, through this, to increase the task effectiveness of the team members.

The opening phase of an encounter carries specific importance. It is where people, often tacitly, negotiate on matters such as the general character of the encounter and the appropriate degree of contact and closeness between the parties (Schegloff, 1979).
In organized meetings, the opening is usually the task of the person chairing the meeting. The findings of the larger study this article is based on show that the managers chairing the meetings use various devices to lighten the atmosphere in the opening phase (Author Helena Kangasharju). They seem to use more time and effort for this activity in cross-border meetings and in meetings held at a high hierarchical level than in national or lower level meetings. From this, it can be concluded that the cross-border meetings at a high hierarchical level are occasions that call for a special attention by the managers. A merger is a case in point (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995).

Extract 1 illustrates a manager's endeavors to lighten the atmosphere of the meeting and to create a feeling of collegiality and solidarity in the opening phase of a meeting. The meeting is held in Finland and there are nine participants present, representing three nationalities, Finns, Swedes and Germans. The chair is Swedish, and he is the manager of the whole group.

Ashforth and Humphrey, who have investigated emotional behavior in organizations, claim (1995) that it is the primary task of the managers to create and sustain shared meanings as well as to put effort on measures

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**Extract 1: Opening the meeting**

01 Ch -> Well (.) you all know that times are changing if you
02 look at the (.) er- different let’s say (.) teevee
03 programs (.) There is a new sort of trend (.) with
04 these (.) er- live soap operas
05 (.)
06 Kauko [Mm.]
07 Ch-> [In ] Sweden there’s a big one now going on called
08 the Bar (.) About ten people operating a bar in
09 Stockholm and living together in a flat. (.) We’re
10 not going to live together but this the first (.)
11 first program of the company
12 (.)
13 Kauko Mm.
14 Ch-> er- which is recorded today. (.) It’s going to be
15 sent live on internet all over the world.
16 -> ((joint laughter))
17 Antti Direct yeah.
18 Ch-> Expected audience zero.
19 -> ((joint laughter))
20 Ch-> Might be someone in XX Company ((= a competitor))
21 who will be forced to look at it.
22 -> ((joint laughter))
23 Kauko Do you [do] you think we beat [the ] O J Simpson’s
24 Ch-> [So] [(--)]
25 Kauko jury trial?
26 Ch-> Could be. ((moves to the issues at hand))
that help the members of the organization to proceed in the same direction. In conjunction with organizational changes such as mergers and acquisitions, this endeavor is extremely important and can be called “creating a fellow-feeling.”

The researchers further claim that creating a fellow-feeling is rather accomplished through symbolic actions than through direct verbal utterances. For example, saying “We are like a big family” sounds naive and manipulative. A better solution would be, for example, to have a party together. Activities such as laughter, play, and humor may also work well. This is precisely what is done in Extract 1. After having moved from an initial small talk phase to the meeting proper (transcript not given here), the manager introduces a telling sequence (lines 1–21) in which he compares the video filming of the meeting to a reality television show. The comparison invites a joint laughter from the members of the group three times (lines 16, 19, and 22).

Laughter sequences can be initiated with several forms of invitation, one of which is producing a “laughable” (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). In Extract 1, the comparison made by the chair functions as a laughable. Laughter sequences can be further extended by producing additional laughables. This also happens in Extract 1: the Finnish participants extend the humorous description through their remarks (lines 17, 23 and 25), which can be heard as reinforcement of the (Swedish) manager’s effort. A special trick that can be assumed to further increase the feeling of collegiality is the manager’s reference to a “common enemy” (i.e., the competitor, lines 20–21).

Joint Laughter as a Topic-Closing Device

In Extract 2, joint laughter involving humor is used in conjunction with closing a topic (see also Haakana, 1999) in a regular meeting of a Finnish-Swedish project group. The topic under discussion is a new instruction program. It has been suggested that some CDs that include instructions will be installed in the personal computers of all staff members. Isto, who is in charge of the technical implementation of the project, is concerned about the quality of the CDs. Before the extract, he has asked who is going to deliver them.

Starting in line 1 and up to line 6, Isto displays an orientation to his expert identity by speaking in the first person and by specifying, in terms of content, what needs to be done. He quite strongly obliges his colleagues
to do what he finds necessary. The other participants show alignment with Isto’s orientation through their agreement tokens (lines 4, 5, and 7).

In line 9, Isto reshapes the context (see Duranti & Goodwin, 1992) by a change of footing (Goffman, 1981). First, by changing the previous first person singular pronoun I into plural we, Isto makes known to the other participants that he shifts his orientation from a specialist identity into an identity of an equal team member with a collective responsibility of the whole team (Drew & Sorjonen, 1997). The shift to a collective footing (Díaz, Antaki, & Collins, 1996) is also marked by the use of a “designedly incomplete utterance” (see Koshik, 2002) as it invites the others to coparticipate in the production of the talk. In other words, the interruption (line 8) is used as a practice for inviting the other participants to join in the construction of the talk. A second change of footing is a shift from a serious, matter-of-fact talk into a humorous mode. This shift seems to be invited by Isto’s gaze (line 9) combined with the interrupted utterance (line 10). So the gaze together with the interrupted utterance is here used as a laughter inviting practice. The chair’s responding laughter displays that Isto’s invitation recontextualizes a shared experience that carries humorous potential, which remains unknown to the analysts. The chair’s candidate completion, “wooden mouse” (line 14), further strengthens this interpretation. The chair, for his part, invites first Matti
(line 12), then Jan (line 13), and finally the whole team (line 17) to join in extending the humorous sequence. The others display their understanding and acceptance of the shift of footing into a jocular mode by extending the laughter sequence (lines 18–21) through additional upgrading “laughable” (Jefferson et al., 1987).

The conjointly constructed humorous sequence and joint laughter evidently foster the activity of “doing collegiality” (i.e., constructing a good relationship between the team members, as suggested by Holmes, 2000, 2006, and Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Above all, the humorous sequence offers the participants a way of closing down a challenging topic through the display of a similar stance and mutual understanding, which are constructive ways of bringing a topic to an end (Haakana, 1999, p. 123). Hence, what is accomplished through the sequence is not only fostering collegiality and positive atmosphere but also constructing a smooth progress of the interaction.

Joint Laughter Reducing Tension in a Challenging Situation

Extract 3 provides an example of shared laughter associated with humor in conjunction with the assignment of a demanding work task. It occurs in the same meeting as Extract 1. Extract 3 occurs in a context where the chair—who is also the manager of the team—is assigning the team members a challenging reporting task with a tight time schedule. In lines 1–12, he states, in a joking mode, that it is a sign of trust from his

Extract 3: Joking on the boss

01 Ch This is now actually (.) a sign of trust (.). if  
02 I didn’t trUST you I would say I  
03 would say (.). mid next week first part (.). because  
04 then I can CHECK (.). and scream a bit  
05 and be more (.). red in the face (.). er not because of  
06 ¬ country X ((refers to his prior slip of tongue  
07 ¬ in the same discussion)) he he  
08 ¬ {((joint laughter))}  
09 Ch but because of of frustration with (difficulties) (.).  
10 But but you get a CHAnce  
11 otherwise I will (.). I will hunt you from the  
12 vacation  
13 Sten Oh (.).  
14 Antti >It’s a [threat]<  
15 Sten [That ] >that is a threat< (.). now  
16 ¬ {((joint laughter))}  
17 Sten It’s not trust its threat†  
18 Antti-> [There there was a nice guy but now†  
19 (.)  
20 Sten [Now he is normal†  
21 ¬ {((joint laughter))}
part not to ask the team members to send the reports by the end of the week but to give them a month.

Toward the end of his long turn, the chair emphasizes his joking mode by referring to a slip of the tongue (lines 6–7), which he made previously in the same discussion. His unilateral laughter (line 7) can be heard as displaying some embarrassment (Haakana, 1999, pp. 135–137), but, perhaps, also as an invitation to joint laughter, because the other participants respond to it by laughter (line 8). In any case, the incident invites the team members to extend the humorous mode. Sten’s “oh” (line 13), first, marks the chair’s talk as new information (Heritage, 1984), and then Antti and Sten, one after the other, respond to the chair’s turns by stating (lines 14–15) that what he is saying is a threat. The responsive laughter by the other participants (line 16) marks Sten’s and Antti’s reactions as “laughables.” After this, Sten and Antti extend the joking mode by uttering their turns (lines 17–18) in a laughing voice. Sten first restates his previous words (“it’s not trust it’s threat,” line 17), and Antti then invites the others to co-participate in the joking by uttering an incomplete utterance “there was a nice guy but now” (line 18), which Sten completes by uttering “now he is normal” (line 20). The completion can be heard claiming that after having been a nice guy, the chair now is more or less like anybody else. The utterance reduces the asymmetrical power relations between the leader and the members and evidently carries humorous potential for the whole team as the completion is followed by joint laughter (line 21).

In Extracts 2 and 3, an interrupted turn is used as a practice for inviting the others to coparticipate in the construction of a joke. In both occasions, upgrading utterances produced by the other participants are then used to extend the laughter sequence. As in Extract 2, the conjointly constructed humorous sequence in Extract 3 evidently creates collegiality within the team. In addition, the joking sequence in Extract 3 also gives the participants an opportunity to reduce the tension connected to a problematic topic. What is specific about Extract 3 is that the participants are humorously aligning and teaming up (Kangasharju, 1998, 2002) against the chair (i.e., the chair is the target of the joke). Hence, the humorous talk is also used to reduce the asymmetry created between the manager and the team members by the task assignment.

Negotiation on the Control of the Agenda

The actions invoking laughter in Extract 4 are different from the three previous examples in several respects, and laughing together is hardly
associated with humor. Extract 4 exemplifies the initiation of a procedure called round-the-table, which, in short, means a round during which all the participants one after the other tell about the current issues in their work. The round is typically carried out in the beginning phase of a meeting. In our data, such a round only occurs in Swedish meetings or in cross-border meetings chaired by a Swedish manager.

To better understand the course of action in Extract 4, the reader is provided with some further knowledge of the round-the-table procedure. The purpose of the round is, on the one hand, to share knowledge and experiences in the group and, on the other hand, to give every participant an equal opportunity, but also a duty, to take the floor at an early stage of the meeting. A further goal is to “clear the air” (i.e., to allow the participants to freely express their most bothering thoughts so that they can better concentrate on the meeting issues proper). A general purpose of the process is to activate the participants and to avoid meetings where only a couple of “important” persons hold the floor. Certain routine and discipline are also required by the participants to keep the individual contributions relevant and suitably short.

In Extract 4, a Swedish manager chairing the meeting introduces the round-the-table procedure to the eight members of his Finnish-Swedish team. When moving to this activity, he also gives instructions concerning the length of the contributions (“shortly,” line 1).

**Extract 4: Joint laughter doing remedial work in interaction**

```
01 Ch  Okay shall we shortly let the word go (. ) go round in the
02       group on on the what's on subject (0.5) er- (. ) since we:
03       (. ) er (. ) stop all the day today
04 Kauko->What about the new office?<
05 Ch   Yeah but
06 Antti->It is co[ming.]
07 Ch->   [Don’t] don’t worry the new office we’ll come back
08       to it (0.4) I’m still around a while you know
09 ->   ([joint laughter lasting 2.5 seconds])
10 Ch   Or is it so interesting that we should keep it (going)?
11 Kauko Yes. He he
12 Antti Yes let’s keep it. He he
13 Lars Once you see the department it can’t leave your head.
14 Ch -> No no serves you right Lars. Could you start with what’s
15       on and (. ) and I would really appreciate if if we dea
16       with this until lunch.
17       (. )
18 Antti Mm.
19 Ch -> So forty-five forty-five minutes and and and try to keep
20       your presentation in in relation to how important you
21       think it is (. ) so we can keep this (0.4) round (. ) round
22       (. ) round the table until lunch.
23       (1.8)
24 Lars Shall I start?
25 Ch   Yes please.
26   (. )
27 Lars   Ee (1.0) I’m delighted to tell you (. ) what I’m up to do
28       within the next very close future --- ((continues))
```
The introduction of the round-the-table process by the manager (lines 1–3) is immediately interrupted by what could be called a slight cultural clash. In line 4, the Finnish participant Kauko poses a question that can be heard as a proposal to change the agenda and, instead of the round-the-table process, to discuss the new office of the company. Kauko’s turn makes apparent a finding of the questionnaire survey conducted in the two corporations before the video recordings of the meetings (see Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). According to the survey results, the attitudes of the Finnish and Swedish employees differed a great deal in regard to issues such as the length of the meetings and the amount of discussion in them. The Finnish employees informed others that they preferred “short and matter-of-fact meetings,” whereas Swedes appreciated detailed and deep-going discussions. Thus, the round-the-table phase introduced by the Swedish manager can be seen as the form of discussion preferred by the Swedes but not by the Finns.

As it is, the Swedish chair is compelled to assure the others (lines 7–8) that the new office will also be discussed in the meeting later on. Before this can happen, another Finnish participant, Antti (line 6), has already said the same thing. After the Finn has spoken, the chair reframes the context (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992) by moving from the matter-of-fact collective footing that he has used in the sequence so far into a more personal and informal footing (Díaz et al., 1996; Goffman, 1981) by shifting from pronoun we (lines 1–2 and 7) into pronoun I (line 8) and a less formal speech style. The chair’s turn is followed by joint laughter (line 9). As compared to Extract 1, the process here is, however, very different: It is hardly possible to hear the turn of the manager (line 8) as a pre-planned strategic act. Rather, the exchange can be seen as a negotiation on the control of the agenda (Fineman, 2000, p. 8; Fineman & Sturdy, 1999) and the laughter as “an appropriate next” (Haakana, 1999, p.116; Jefferson et al., 1987)—that is, as a communicative act that is a good enough solution in the conflicting situation. Laughing together clearly does remedial work because through it the faces of parties involved, and not the least that of the chair, are saved. On the other hand, the laughter sequence is not extended by the participants in the way of the other three extracts but is ended quite abruptly.

After the joint laughter, the chair still poses a question concerning the interest of the participants in the new office (line 10). The primary target of the question is Kauko who has initially questioned the round-the-table process, but the question is responded by both Kauko and Antti (lines 11 and 12). Verbally, their responses can be heard expressing interest, but the laugh tokens attached to the turns indicate that the answers should not be
taken seriously. The rest of the sequence is also reproduced here, because it shows that the manager has no difficulties in returning to his controlling role again. He also resumes the previous collective footing by shifting to the use of pronoun we from line 10 onwards (lines 10, 15 and 21).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the microlevel analysis of the extracts taken from meeting interactions demonstrate that joint laughter occurs in conjunction with specific meeting activities. Four main functions of shared laughter in the interactions were detected. The results also support the findings of the previous research that view shared laughter as a device that can be used to reduce the hierarchical asymmetry of the interactants and to release tension in challenging situations. Furthermore, laughing together can increase feelings of closeness and collegiality and have remedial capacity in face-threatening or embarrassing situations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Glenn, 1989; Haakana, 1999).

The cases examined in this study show that shared laughter was always connected to task accomplishment even when laughter was clearly associated with humor and amusement. For instance, no canned jokes were used to invite laughter from the meeting participants. Joint laughter appeared as a methodically produced and managed activity that does not occur randomly but is linked to activities that can be described as challenging. This feature can, at least in part, be attributed to the institutional character of the interactions, and it distinguishes the joint laughter occurring in organizational meetings from laughter in mundane contexts.

Four main functions for laughing together in these workplace meetings were identified. First, shared laughter associated with humor was strategically invited by the managers and team leaders to create a relaxed working climate and to reduce tension and asymmetry between the members of the team. Such invitations were repeatedly used in conjunction with the openings of the meetings, particularly in cross-border meetings at a high hierarchical level. This finding empirically confirms the theoretical claim presented by Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), according to which the leaders can use humor and laughter strategically in meetings with their subordinates.

The second function of joint laughter was closing down a topic or a phase of a meeting in a way that engages the participants in public displays of consensus and “like-mindedness” (Glenn, 1989; Greatbatch &
Clark, 2003). In such cases, laughter may be initiated by both team leaders and team members, and laughing together functions as an assessment that the participants share a mutual understanding on the issue at hand, which is a good way of bringing a topic to an end (see also Adelswärd & Öberg, 1998; Haakana, 1999, p.123).

Third, joint laughter can be invited by team members to diminish tension and stress in conjunction with demanding task assignments. When joint laughter is invited by team members, the construction of the laughter sequence seems to be somewhat different from the sequences initiated by the managers. The managers were found more likely to create a “one-to-many,” or “entertainer–audience” communicative event (see Glenn, 1989), whereas the team members more likely used the resources available in a multiparty situation to collectively construct a laughter sequence. For instance, the humorous mode may be initiated by one member who invites the others to join in the development of the humorous items. The procedure may include activities such as affirming the feeling of collegiality, showing collegiality among the team members and teaming up through laughing.

A fourth important function of shared laughter in the present database was accomplishing remedial work in a problematic or face-threatening situation. The detailed analysis of a case in point revealed that such laughter could be initiated by the team members in a situation threatening the face of the team leader. In this context, laughing together can be viewed as an affiliative action but, in accordance with prior findings (Jefferson et al., 1987; Haakana, 1999), the occurrence of shared laughter was very short.

Communicative practices used to invoke laughter were also an object of analysis in the present study. When laughter was associated with humor, the practices used to invite laughter from the other participants included activities such as making a humorous comparison, cutting off an utterance in progress to invite humorous completions by the others, and using gaze as a device for reconstructing shared humorous experiences related to the issue at hand. Collective construction of a laughing sequence may also consist of several subsequent, often upgraded, laughables produced by many participants. Ultimately, the phenomenon called laughable is, however, a complex one, as noted by Glenn (1989). It is not always easy to say what exactly makes people laugh. According to Glenn, “virtually any utterance or action could provoke laughter in someone, under certain circumstances” (p. 147).
On the whole, the cases examined in this study indicate that the functions of shared laughter in meeting interaction form a continuum. At the one end, it is laughter that is more or less consciously invited by the participants through various humorous elements. Such laughter typically functions as a device creating “a fellow-feeling” and lightening the atmosphere, particularly in the opening phases of the meetings of new groups (see also Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). At the other end of the continuum is joint laughter that seems to be an almost obligatory element for a smooth progress of communication in face-threatening or challenging situations. In some instances, these functions seem to be combined. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the more the laughing is perceived as a humorous activity related to a jocular mode, the more likely it is extended through various upgrading elements by the other participants. In contrast, laughter associated with problematic issues, though affiliative, tends to be short and not extended through extra elements. Still, all the instances of laughing together in the extracts can be regarded as displaying co-operativeness and collegiality, promoting a smooth progress of communication and thus improving the task performance of the persons involved and, ultimately, the achievement of the goals of the organization.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

Our study demonstrates that laughter can be analyzed as a social activity that is methodically produced by the interactants. On the other hand, the microlevel analysis of interaction has its limitations: the detailed analysis is time consuming, and extended examples are difficult to present and discuss in a short article. Still, there are a lot of phenomena related to laughter in business contexts that can be viewed as interesting objects of future research. In the first place, the role of humor and laughter among the representatives of different cultures and in different cross-cultural interactions could be extensively examined. A further object of analysis could be the comparison of unilateral and shared laughter in business contexts. The study of the normative attitudes associated with laughing together forms also an intriguing field of research: For example, when do people in a group join the laughter and when not, and what happens if they do not?
NOTE

1. English is not the mother tongue of any of the participants but is used as a *lingua franca*. Therefore, the native English reader may find some of the utterances a bit strange.

APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>the point of overlap onset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>)</td>
<td>the point at which the overlap terminates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>no break or gap between two adjacent utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>a micropause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>falling intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>::</td>
<td>lengthening of the sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;yes&quot;</td>
<td>especially soft sounds relative to the surrounding talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>()</td>
<td>dubious hearings or speaker-identifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>()()</td>
<td>transcriber's comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;yes&lt;</td>
<td>faster speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;yes&gt;</td>
<td>slower speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp;yesi.</td>
<td>smiling voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@yes@</td>
<td>animated voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>increased volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>cut off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[L,0]</td>
<td>silence timed in tenths of seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td>rise in pitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(--)</td>
<td>indecipherable speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


