

## INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF ‘SMILE’ IN MODERN LINGUISTICS: CONNOTATIONS AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS

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**Annotation:** *This article investigates the concept of “smile” in modern linguistics through innovative approaches that emphasize its semantic connotations and pragmatic functions. In contemporary linguistic theory, a smile is not merely a positive facial expression but a complex communicative phenomenon shaped by context, intention, and sociocultural factors. The aim of this research is to examine how the concept of “smile” operates as a multidimensional unit in discourse, reflecting both positive and negative meanings. The research employs qualitative interpretative analysis to investigate the semantic variability and pragmatic roles of “smile” in communicative and literary contexts. Special attention is given to its connotative range, including sincerity, politeness, irony, sarcasm, emotional concealment, and interpersonal strategy. The findings indicate that the meaning of “smile” is highly context-dependent and influenced by situational and cultural parameters.*

**Key words:** *concept, connotation, politeness, face threatening acts, pragmatic functions, laughter, sarcasm, irony.*

### **Introduction**

Smiles and laughter serve a wide array of positive functions in human interaction, extending far beyond the mere expression of amusement or happiness. These nonverbal and paralinguistic phenomena function as multifaceted communicative resources that facilitate social bonding, emotional regulation, politeness strategies, and interpersonal coordination across diverse contexts. In English, the terms “smile” and “laughter” are often used in a closely related and mostly synonymous manner. Therefore, in academic discourse, these two terms are frequently examined together within the same analytical framework to explore their interconnected semantic and pragmatic functions.

One of the most significant positive aspects of the concept of “smile” is its role in expressing social bonding and relational connection. At its core, laughter (smile) constitutes a fundamental mechanism for social bonding, fostering a sense of affiliation, group cohesion, and mutual adherence among interlocutors. In romantic and intimate encounters, shared laughter often functions as a positive signal of rapport, indicating comfort, reciprocity, and permission to transition toward more personal topics. Reciprocated laughter tends to diminish social asymmetries and strengthen interpersonal ties.

## Method

Furthermore, laughter and smiling signal affiliative intent, conveying engagement, amusement, and a preference for solidarity with conversational partners. In mediated and digital environments, these functions persist: emoji such as the “grin” face are frequently employed to construct and maintain relational closeness. Similarly, in broadcast media, hosts’ empathetic laughter contributes to the creation of para-social relationships, generating a sense of companionship and emotional connection for audiences. Secondly, smiles and laughter are closely associated with enhanced mental and physical well-being, as well as the maintenance of a positive outlook. Laughter frequently serves as a mood-transformative device, reframing serious, tense, or distressing situations into lighter, more humorous ones, thereby shifting the interactional atmosphere toward positivity. It can also operate as a relief mechanism, particularly when an anticipated negative outcome is resolved as benign or inconsequential. In contemporary media representations, laughter and broad smiles have become potent visual symbols of authentic happiness, offering viewers both emotional gratification and ideological reinforcement of positive affective states.

From a pragmatic perspective, smiles and laughter function as versatile politeness strategies that mitigate potential face threats. An apologetic smile, for instance, signals awareness of an offense while simultaneously conveying concern for the hearer’s feelings, thereby performing relational repair. Likewise, a grin or soft chuckle can attenuate the illocutionary force of directives, requests, or other potentially imposing speech acts, rendering them less imposing and preserving face for both speaker and hearer.

In conversational management, smiles often serve as back-channel signals, indicating attentive listening and encouraging the speaker to continue without claiming a full turn. Laughter, in turn, acts as a form of social glue, promoting cooperation, preventing conversational breakdowns or awkward silences, and sustaining the overall flow of interaction. Subsequently, the positive functions of smiles and laughter manifest distinctly across specialized domains. In psychotherapeutic settings, they contribute significantly to the development and maintenance of the therapeutic alliance, cultivating an atmosphere of warmth, safety, and emotional containment. A therapist’s gentle, modulated smile, for example, can convey empathy and validation, helping the client feel seen and supported. In narrative discourse, narrators and characters may employ smiles or wry laughter to frame potentially threatening or adverse events with ironic humor, thereby underscoring themes of good fortune or successful escape from danger.

In digital messaging, particularly among middle-aged users, the “smiley” emoji is predominantly deployed to index a broadly positive affective stance such as joy, goodwill, or benediction rather than intense emotional arousal.

Turning to the negative aspects of the concept of “smile,” it is important to note that although smiles and laughter are predominantly associated with positive affective states and prosocial functions, scholarly sources also illuminate their “dark side”, wherein these expressions can serve as instruments of aggression, social exclusion, dominance, and emotional masking. Far from being universally benign, smiles and laughter may function as subtle yet powerful tools for negotiating power imbalances, expressing contempt, and managing interpersonal conflict.

From the point of the aggressive and hierarchically oriented functions, laughter, in particular, can adopt a distinctly negative receiver-directed valence, especially in the

form of *schadenfreude* laughter. Characterized by high dominance and a malicious intent to belittle the target, such laughter elevates the laugher's social status while simultaneously humiliating or diminishing the recipient. It may be deployed strategically to intensify feelings of shame, signal contempt, or enact ridicule, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies or punishing perceived deviations from group norms.

In terms of defensive and emotion-regulatory roles, smiles and laughter also operate as intricate defense mechanisms that allow individuals to mask or regulate underlying negative emotional states. Individuals frequently employ laughter to conceal feelings of nervousness, sadness, anxiety, or fear, thereby presenting a socially acceptable facade in situations where vulnerability might otherwise be exposed. In certain contexts, self-deprecating laughter functions as a form of self-devaluation, serving as a protective shield that deflects deeper emotional engagement or intimacy. Moreover, in therapeutic and professional settings, laughter and smiles may signal underlying insecurity or relational tension. An "uncertain smile" or synchronized nervous laughter can reveal a lack of internal confidence and function as a subtle avoidance strategy, preventing genuine emotional connection or confrontation.

In interpersonal and mediated contexts, the pragmatic implications of smiles and laughter can be intentionally adversarial. An apologetic smile, while seemingly polite, simultaneously threatens the speaker's own positive face by publicly acknowledging responsibility for a transgression. Among younger users in digital communication, the "smiley" emoji is often subverted for ironic or sarcastic purposes, conveying attitudes that are diametrically opposed to its conventional positive denotation. Laughter can further serve as a mechanism of social punishment, highlighting taboo violations and inducing shame in the target. Researchers have delineated several distinct negative variants, including "miserable," "false," and "contemptuous" smiles, as well as "bitter" and "cynical" forms of laughter. These expressions enable speakers to communicate disapproval, superiority, or derision under the guise of seemingly innocuous nonverbal behavior. The pragmatic aspects of smiles and laughter involve their use as strategic communicative tools that serve specific goals in interaction, far beyond the mere expression of internal emotion. Pragmatic functions of these expressions can be categorized into conversational management, interpersonal strategy, and face management.

Additionally, smiles and laughter play a pivotal role in organizing and structuring conversational discourse. These nonverbal and paralinguistic resources function as effective tools for managing interactional flow, turn-taking, and topical organization. Laughter frequently serves as a discourse marker, operating as a paralinguistic equivalent of verbal connectors such as "next" or "I am concluding this topic". Empirical research indicates that "discourse laughter" occurs significantly more frequently at points of topic termination than at topic initiation. In addition, "thinking faces" stylized expressions involving gaze aversion or a puzzled facial configuration act as collateral signals. These cues inform the addressee that the ensuing pause is devoted to word search or cognitive processing rather than an invitation for turn exchange.

Functioning as back-channel cues, smiles, whether conveyed through facial expressions or represented by emojis in digital communication signal attentiveness and encourage the speaker to continue without the listener taking a full conversational turn. They also facilitate smooth turn-taking transitions in both face-to-face and online

settings. Furthermore, speakers often coordinate gaze and head movements, frequently accompanied by smiles to “point” toward their own manual gestures, thereby highlighting critical information and enhancing the addressee’s likelihood of successful processing and uptake.

In terms of interpersonal and relational strategy, beyond structural functions, smiles and laughter serve as strategic resources for managing interpersonal relationships and negotiating social dynamics. Laughter is often deployed to elicit information by generating inferences that encourage interlocutors to disclose details they might otherwise withhold. In romantic contexts, shared laughter functions as a positive signal of rapport and intimacy, granting participants implicit permission to transition toward more personal or sensitive topics.

These expressions are also implicated in the negotiation of social status and dominance. Subordinates, for example, may feel a pragmatic obligation to laugh at a superior’s humorous remarks (“laughables”) as a means of signaling alignment and securing their position within the hierarchy. Conversely, schadenfreude laughter can be employed to assert dominance, belittle others, and facilitate social exclusion. In mediated environments, such as talk shows, a host’s empathetic or affiliative laughter fosters para-social closeness, creating an illusion of companionship and emotional intimacy for the viewing audience.

In addition, smiles and laughter constitute key mechanisms in face management and politeness strategies. They are routinely employed to mitigate potential face threats by attenuating the illocutionary force of speech acts such as requests, orders, or criticisms, thereby rendering them less imposing. An apologetic smile, in particular, enables speakers to acknowledge an offense or error while simultaneously negotiating the degree of responsibility and the severity of the transgression. Such gestures help reduce explicit commitment to fault, thus protecting the speaker’s positive face.

Additionally, laughter serves as an effective strategy for easing interpersonal conflict. It can defuse tension, distract participants from distressing thoughts, or improve the emotional state of an interlocutor who is experiencing anger or sadness. Finally, smiles and laughter provide an interpretive layer that modifies the meaning of verbal or textual utterances. In digital communication platforms such as WeChat, “smile” emojis are used to signal the underlying propositional attitude of a message (e.g., joy or benediction), a nuance that is often difficult to discern from text alone. These cues also mark utterances as non-serious, functioning as indicators of irony, humor, or playfulness. Among younger users, the “smiley” emoji is frequently subverted as an attitude marker, conveying ironic or even negative meanings that contrast sharply with its conventional positive interpretation.

### **Results**

In professional contexts, such as psychotherapy, therapists may deliberately downregulate their own smiles or laughter to modulate and contain clients’ emotional expressions. This restrained nonverbal behavior signals that the client’s distress is being taken seriously, thereby contributing to emotional containment and regulation within the therapeutic alliance. In everyday communication, smiles and laughter function as sophisticated strategic resources rather than mere involuntary expressions of emotion. These paralinguistic and nonverbal cues play multifaceted roles in managing conversational structure, interpersonal relationships, emotional states, power dynamics, and face.

From the point of conversational management and flow, smiles and laughter contribute significantly to the organization of discourse. Discourse laughter frequently serves as a paralinguistic marker signaling topic termination or providing transitional “social glue” between segments of talk; empirical studies show it occurs more often at topic boundaries than at their initiation. “Thinking faces” stylized expressions involving gaze aversion or puzzled configurations act as collateral signals, indicating that a pause is devoted to cognitive processing (e.g., word search) rather than inviting a turn exchange. In both face-to-face and digital contexts, smiles (including emojis) operate as back-channel signals, conveying attention and encouraging continuation without claiming a full turn.

In accordance with strategic and interpersonal functions, beyond structural roles, these expressions are mobilized to achieve specific social goals. Laughter can elicit information by generating inferences that encourage disclosure. In romantic contexts, it signals intimacy and grants implicit permission to shift toward more personal topics. Smiles and laughter also facilitate face management and politeness by mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs). An apologetic smile enables speakers to acknowledge an offense while negotiating responsibility and reducing explicit self-blame, thereby protecting their positive face. Similarly, a grin or chuckle can soften the illocutionary force of directives or requests, rendering them less imposing. In media settings, host laughter fosters para-social closeness, creating a sense of companionship for audiences.

In the view of emotional regulation and defensive roles, smiles and laughter often serve as defense mechanisms to mask or modulate internal affective states. Individuals may laugh to conceal nervousness, sadness, anxiety, or fear, sometimes engaging in self-deprecating or “devaluating” laughter to distance themselves from emotional vulnerability. In professional contexts such as psychotherapy, therapists may deliberately downregulate their own smiles or laughter to contain clients’ emotions, signaling serious attention and providing a steadying, face-preserving presence.

In line with power, dominance, and the “dark side”, these cues also reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. Lower-status participants (e.g., employees) may feel obligated to laugh at superiors’ “laughables” to signal alignment and maintain standing. Conversely, schadenfreude laughter characterized by dominance and negative receiver-directed valence can belittle targets, express contempt, and facilitate social exclusion, thereby elevating the laugher’s status.

Thus, smiles and laughter operate as versatile “politeness weapons” in face work. They mitigate social friction, negotiate status, regulate emotion, and navigate sensitive interactions, demonstrating their strategic value far beyond simple amusement.

Meanwhile, involuntary displays of emotion, smiles and laughter in everyday interaction operate as complex and strategic communicative devices. They fulfill multiple functions, including shaping the structure and progression of conversation, mediating social relationships and hierarchies, and helping to regulate individuals’ internal emotional states.

Conforming to conversational management and flow, laughter and smiles play a central role in organizing discourse. Discourse laughter acts as a paralinguistic connective, signaling that a speaker has finished with a topic or providing “social glue” between segments of dialogue. It occurs significantly more often at topic termination points than at the beginning of topics. Stylized thinking faces expressions in which a speaker looks away or adopts a puzzled look serve as collateral signals, informing the

addressee that the pause is devoted to word search rather than inviting a turn exchange. In both face-to-face and digital settings, smiles (including emojis) function as back-channel signals, indicating attention and encouraging the speaker to continue without requiring a full turn.

Beyond structuring talk, these cues are strategically mobilized to achieve specific social goals. Laughter is used to generate inferences and encourage a partner to reveal secrets or “spill the beans.” In romantic contexts, laughter functions as a “green flag,” signaling relational closeness and granting permission to shift to more personal or sensitive topics. In face management and politeness, apologetic smiles and shrugs allow speakers to acknowledge an offense or error while negotiating responsibility, thereby protecting their positive face (public self-image). Similarly, a “grin” or chuckle can soften the illocutionary force of a demand, making an order appear less rude. In media contexts such as talk shows, host laughter creates para-social closeness, fostering a sense of companionship and intimacy for viewers.

Smiles and laughter frequently serve as defense mechanisms to mask or modulate internal states. Individuals often laugh to cover up nervousness, sadness, anxiety, or fear, sometimes engaging in “self-devaluation” to distance themselves from their own emotional pain. In professional settings such as psychotherapy, therapists may downregulate their own smiles or laughter to “contain” a client’s overwhelming emotions, signaling that the client’s pain is being taken seriously rather than dismissed with levity.

In accordance with power, dominance, and the “dark side”, these expressions also have a darker dimension related to group dynamics. Laughter can signal social hierarchy; low-status listeners often feel a pragmatic obligation to laugh at the “laughables” of high-status speakers (e.g., employers) to signal agreement and secure their standing. Conversely, schadenfreude laughter is used to express dominance and potentially exclude non-conforming individuals from a group, reinforcing the status of the “laugher” at the expense of the target.

The pragmatic functions of smiles and laughter vary significantly by age, gender, and context. In social networking sites, middle-aged users typically use the “smile” emoji to signal joy or care, while younger users frequently employ it to express irony or a negative attitude. Research suggests that women are more likely to initiate laughter rounds or laugh alone compared to men. In media, female hosts have been observed to generate nearly twice as much laughter as male hosts, correlating with higher audience engagement. In modern media, laughter has become the visual representation of “authentic happiness,” serving as a form of ideological and emotional gratification for the audience.

Smiles and laughter serve as essential tools for face work the ongoing negotiation and maintenance of one’s public self-image, or positive face. These expressions function as redressive actions that mitigate social friction, manage status hierarchies, and protect the face of both speaker and hearer. Rather than simple expressions of joy, they operate as deliberate co-speech acts and strategic “politeness weapons” in sensitive or face-threatening communicative tasks.

Apologizing inherently threatens the speaker’s positive face through admission of fault or self-blame. Apologetic smiles, shrugs, and grins help navigate this dilemma by reducing explicit commitment to the offense. A silent “apologetic smile” allows speakers to acknowledge a fault without voicing a formal, face-damaging verbal

apology, thereby “reducing the weight” of the transgression and their involvement in it. Narrators often employ smiles with self-mocking humor to acknowledge minor errors such as being inarticulate or stating the obvious thus saving face after a social slip. Because gestures are “maximally vague” compared to words, they also provide deniability, enabling speakers to admit fault while maintaining ambiguity about their level of responsibility.

Conforming to protecting the hearer’s face and softening FTAs, smiles and laughter frequently soften the illocutionary force of potentially rude, demanding, or intrusive speech acts. In digital communication, adding a “grin” emoji to an order transforms it from a face-threatening command into a less rude suggestion, saving face for both interlocutors. When asking for a favor a highly face-threatening situation laughter provides a “paralinguistic flavor” that renders the request more indirect and easier to decline without awkwardness. Speakers may also use solo laughter to signal that provocative utterances should not be taken seriously, indicating a preference for solidarity over confrontation.

Turning to defensive and masking functions, laughter serves as a “trouble-resistant” resource and defense mechanism during vulnerability. Individuals often laugh to mask nervousness, embarrassment, or fear. A specific “devaluing laugh” enables individuals to distance themselves from their own emotional pain or distress through levity. In psychotherapy, therapists may downregulate their own laughter to provide a “steadying presence,” helping to contain the client’s emotions and maintain a safe, face-preserving environment.

Face-saving laughter is closely tied to social status and group cohesion. Low-status listeners (such as employees) often feel a pragmatic obligation to laugh at the “laughables” of high-status speakers to signal agreement and secure their standing within the hierarchy. Discourse laughter (often termed “polite” laughter) functions as “social glue,” providing a paralinguistic connective that signals topic termination and maintains conversational flow without requiring substantive and potentially awkward verbal transitions. In collaborative settings, laughter also serves as an acknowledgment response, indicating that feedback has been processed and the interaction can move forward.

In accordance with de-escalation, emotional regulation, and digital politeness, Solo laughter can de-escalate tension by distracting a partner from troubling thoughts or lifting the spirits of someone who is sad or angry, thereby prioritizing solidarity. In clinical settings, therapists use soft, modulated smiles to convey warmth and reassurance, signaling acceptance and containing the client’s emotional vulnerability. In computer-mediated communication (CMC), emojis such as the “smile” or “grin” perform pragmatic functions beyond their literal meaning: they signal propositional attitude (e.g., joy or benediction), act as hedges or modest devices for politeness and rapport management, and soften harsher texts. “Empathetic laughter” by media hosts further creates para-social closeness, building a sense of intimacy with audiences.

Although smiles and laughter are frequently associated with positive affect and affiliation, scholarly sources also highlight their “dark side,” in which these expressions serve as instruments of social punishment, hierarchy enforcement, emotional evasion, and interpersonal aggression.

Turning to mockery and social aggression, Smiles and laughter can function as weapons of dominance and social exclusion. Schadenfreude laughter, characterized by

high dominance and negative receiver-directed valence, is deployed maliciously to intensify a target's humiliation or to express triumph over their misfortune. In group settings, laughter often acts as a segregating force; for example, in school bullying episodes, collective laughter ridicules and belittles non-conforming individuals, thereby reinforcing the laugher's in-group status while pushing outsiders away. Researchers have identified distinct negative variants such as "bitter," "taunting," and "cynical" laughter, which convey lack of empathy and serve to punish others by highlighting taboos or inducing shame. Additional examples include mocking laughter directed at a colleague's mistake during a meeting to subtly undermine their competence or sarcastic group laughter that excludes a newcomer from workplace banter.

The most common side of smile effects are sarcasm and irony. In digital and narrative communication, the surface positivity of smiles is frequently subverted for ironic or negative purposes. Among younger users, the "smiley" emoji is commonly employed to signal the opposite of its literal meaning, conveying irony or a negative attitude. The "lol" emoji functions as an attitude changer; for instance, a seemingly positive statement such as "What a beautiful sunny day" may be followed by "lol" to indicate that the speaker actually finds the weather annoying or inconvenient. In storytelling, an asymmetrical wry smile is often used to mark ironic good fortune or to frame dangerous situations with dry, detached humor, as when a character narrowly escapes harm and comments on it with a twisted smile.

In terms of ignoring and emotional evasion, smiles and laughter frequently operate as defense mechanisms to avoid genuine emotional contact or to dismiss the gravity of a situation. Laughter is commonly used to mask internal feelings of fear, sadness, nervousness, or anxiety. One client in a therapeutic study described her laughter as a form of "devaluing" herself, using levity to distance herself from personal emotional pain. Unjoined laughter when one party initiates laughter that others do not reciprocate violates conversational expectations and can signal a deliberate refusal to seek intimacy or express solidarity. In psychotherapy, counter-therapeutic synchrony occurs when a therapist reflexively joins a client's defensive laughter; rather than providing containment, this shared laughter reinforces emotional avoidance and overlooks underlying vulnerability. For example, a client laughing nervously about a traumatic event may have the therapist's mirrored chuckle inadvertently validate avoidance instead of encouraging deeper exploration.

In the context of misunderstanding and rejection, ambiguous smiles can generate relational tension when perceived as uncertain or inappropriately flirtatious in professional or formal contexts. Therapists have noted that smiles or laughter lacking grounded eye contact often feel rejective, signaling that the premises for a serious conversation have not been adequately established. An additional example is a hesitant smile during a performance review that an employee interprets as dismissal rather than encouragement, thereby increasing anxiety and damaging rapport.

In literary and dialogic discourse, descriptions of smiles and laughter rarely denote simple happiness. Instead, narrators employ these expressions to convey specific intentions and illocutionary forces, rendering vague nonverbal gestures more explicit for the reader.

Examples from Contemporary Fiction (COCA)

Several instances from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) illustrate how specific smiles modify or redefine character dialogue:

- In Uche Okonkwo's *The Girl Who Lied* (2018), a driver offers an apologetic smile silently upon seeing someone, thereby signaling regret without verbal apology.
- In a 2019 narrative, the character Kara, called away mid-conversation, delivers an apologetic smile while saying, "Sorry, I gotta go. But it was incredible to meet you, Owen", clarifying the shift from friendliness to regret.
- In a 2015 story, an old woman on a bus, aware that fellow passenger Chen is irritated by the smell of her fish, states, "My late husband likes salted fish", accompanied by an apologetic grin. The grin transforms the remark into a redressive act for the sensory offense.
- In a 2001 narrative, David, blamed for arriving late to a dinner reservation, explains, "I just lost track of the time, that's all", while offering an apologetic smile to acknowledge his fault and soften the face threat to his partner.

#### In the Classical and Historical Literary Contexts

Historical and philosophical texts similarly utilize laughter to signal social and moral dimensions. Early philosophical discussions by Socrates and Plato often highlighted laughter's "spectacle" and its potential to be malicious, serving to enhance a target's humiliation. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, contrasts Renaissance celebratory laughter used "to fight for a cause" with modern laughter that masks taboos or shame. Drawing on Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, one study describes how dialogue laughter can render emotionally weighty moments "unbearably light", functioning as a defense against deeper emotional engagement.

#### Conclusion

Smiles and laughter function as sophisticated, polysemic communicative tools rather than mere involuntary emotional expressions. Their meaning and pragmatic force are highly context-dependent, enabling them to serve multiple roles in human interaction.

Positively, they act as essential mechanisms for conversational management, face work, and social bonding. Discourse laughter and thinking faces organize talk flow, while apologetic smiles and grins mitigate face-threatening acts, soften demands, and protect positive face. Shared laughter signals intimacy in romantic contexts, fosters para-social closeness in media, and provides "social glue" for group cohesion. In digital communication, emojis such as the "grin" or "smiley" perform age-specific functions signaling joy among middle-aged users or acting as ironic attitude changers among youth.

However, these expressions also possess a significant "dark side". Schadenfreude laughter, with its high dominance and negative valence, facilitates social exclusion, ridicule, and hierarchy enforcement. Defensive laughter masks anxiety or enables "self-devaluation", while unjoined or counter-therapeutic laughter can reinforce emotional avoidance. In literature, wry smiles and apologetic smiles (as seen in COCA examples) strategically mark irony, redress social breaches, or soften exits.

Ultimately, smiles and laughter operate as versatile "politeness weapons" that simultaneously build rapport, regulate emotion, negotiate power, and subvert meaning. Their multifunctionality highlights the nuanced, strategic nature of nonverbal communication in everyday, professional, and mediated contexts.

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